



3 C IX

—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さとりがため

Cube×Cursed×Curious

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

3
—シーキューブ—
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あけましておめでとうございます!

むら まさ

村正このは

いつもは冷静なはずなんですけど、本日は無礼講!? お祭り会場には彼女に飲ませてはいけないお酒もあって……。

うえ の さり か

上野錐霞

沈着冷静が信条のいんちょーさん。新年になっても「馬鹿げている」と連発しているけど、今日はちょっとはしゃいでいい日……かも!?

くろ え

黒絵

Hなカルタ&Hな言動に新年早々皆が大慌て!? 黒絵は今年も変わらないようです。

Scene01:謹賀新年

フィア

夜知家に居候して初めてのお正月ということで興奮中! でも案の定はしゃぎすぎているんな騒動を巻き起こしちゃいます。

や ち はる あき

夜知春亮

相変わらず枯れている高校一年生。お正月でいつも以上にうるさいフィア、このは、黒絵、そして錐霞に初詣でも振り回されて?

「^{かし}恐い^{かし}み^{かし}恐い^{かし}み^{まを}白しますが、ひどくです〜」

いすず
伍鈴

いつも千早にきつい態度で叱られる、普通の人間とはちょっと違う印象を持つ少女。なにかよからぬことを画策している様子。

うし　こく
Scene02:丑の刻参り

「あー、ふー、うん。ん、こんな話してる場合じゃないうわー」

ちはや
千早

丑の刻参りという巫女にあるまじき行為をしている女の子。個人的な仕事としてやっているらしいが、どうやらそこにはお金以外にも何か理由があるようで……。



Scene03:迫られる瞬間



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エピローグ



置く度に
みかんが
無くなるのは
なぜなんだろうな
フア!





3姉妹

—シーキューブ—
Cube x Cursed x Curious

IV

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

Slither~ Slurp slurp.

"Hey Haruaki... It's true that this is tasty and it's not like I'm complaining."

"Hmm?"

"But isn't today a special occasion? I was thinking surely the cooking would be much more special than usual."

As though trying to prove that she was not complaining, Fear noisily sucked up the noodles in one breath from the large bowl she was holding. Haruaki was eating the same noodles—namely, New Year's soba noodles—while replying:

"Special food? But I can't help it. Starting from a long time ago, the tradition is to eat this on New Year's Eve. But I guess it's true that it's a bit plain."

"Yes, speaking of plain there's Cow Tits. Then you should know quite well why soba noodles must be eaten?"

"What do you mean, 'speaking of plain,' how rude! Whatever, I'll still explain to you. The point of eating soba is a wish for the coming year to bring happiness in a long and slender stream."

"Long is good, but wishing for happiness to become slender sounds kinda negative in imagery, right?"

Kuroe slurped soba noodles into her dainty mouth while cocking her head slightly. In response, Fear nodded vigorously in agreement.

"That's totally right! Damn Cow Tits, to think you'd stoop to deceiving us with a half-assed explanation—This must be whatchamacallit. How do I put this? Surely you must be targeting the concept of 'slenderness' and involuntarily exposed your subconscious wish. Seriously, you really wish for slenderness that much huh... Yeah, I'm sure of it."

"H-How dare you say such rude things with utter conceit on your face!? To think I explained in good faith!"

Even on the very last day of the calendar year, the Yachi family's dinner table remained noisy as usual. Haruaki smiled wryly as he recalled all the events over the past year—especially all sorts of sudden incidents that happened starting from the second school term.

First came the delivery of the black cube, then the discovery of the rice cracker thief, successive attacks from enemies and other characters, getting to know Sovereignty and Shiraho, the sports festival, the cultural festival, followed by exams and Christmas...

"Hmm, what's with you, Haruaki? Why are you suddenly making such a shamelessly perverted smile?"

"No I'm not... I was just thinking that a lot happened this year. Although some of it really was quite serious... But thank goodness we can sit down casually right now to welcome the arrival of the New Year."

After hearing Haruaki's honest thoughts, Fear averted her gaze in embarrassment. Then playing with the television remote, she carelessly changed channels and said:

"Muu... That too, it's not like I can't understand what you're feeling. But next year, more unwanted and uninvited visitors could continue to show up."

"Fair enough... But still, I'm thinking very optimistically that since we got through this year successfully, next year will surely be okay as well. We'll always manage somehow. Yeah, even those visitors probably won't be so free during New Year's as to come over and play. Anyway, we should relax a bit, at least during New Year's."

"Isn't that a bit too optimistic... Although that's what I wish for as well."

"I agree~ After all, this is the first time we're celebrating the New Year since Ficchi's arrival. I also hope we could relax and have as much fun as possible~"

Having finished their noodles, Konoha and Kuroe also smiled and commented. Moments later, Haruaki finished his soba as well. Konoha stood up, prepared to handle the clean up, then brewed hot tea. Meanwhile, Fear simply stayed in the warm kotatsu^[1] while surfing television channels.

"I wanna relax and take a break too, but today's television keeps broadcasting these strange things... They're not going to have those shows with the fluffy furry things? I was originally thinking, on this kind of occasion for eliminating a whole year's accumulated fatigue, I really need to receive more of their healing energy en masse!"

"It's because New Year's Eve is reserved for a lineup of special programmes~ Also, there's the Red White Song Battle^[2]... Although just like you, I'm not quite familiar with the latest pop music."

"Oh, then at this time I'd like to propose a great idea through reverse logic. Since there's nothing good to watch, let's amuse ourselves with something apart from the television~"

"Ohoh, Kuroe, you have some kind of fun suggestion?"

"Of course." Kuroe searched her chest pocket for a while then took out a small box.

"I already expected this to happen, so I took out a set of karuta^[3] from my room just now. Would you like to move ahead of schedule and start playing before the New Year, Ficchi?"

"What is karuta?"

Fear tilted her head and asked in puzzlement. Kuroe replied in an exceptionally cautious tone of voice:

"Fufufu. Karuta is definitely no simple game, requiring the use of wits, physical stamina, luck, memory, vigilance and reflexes, all at the same time. Although the rules are simply, you'll lose if you don't make use of your full abilities. It's a traditional Japanese card game... Yes."

"Hmm, this sounds more fun than watching television. Although I don't really get it, let's try it out."

Fear showed enthusiasm on her face as she crawled out of the kotatsu.

"Haru, do you want to play with us? After all, including the person reading out the cards, the recommended number of players for this game is three or more. Although two can still play alone, it's more fun the more people we have, after all."

"It's really been quite a while since I last saw karuta cards... I don't mind playing, but lemme help Konoha get the kitchen in order first. I'd feel really bad if I forced the final clean up of the year on her. You should teach Fear the rules while you're waiting."

"Got it~ Uh... Ficchi, first the cards are arranged properly like this. Then you inspect the drawing and the words on the card. Next, over here are the 'reading cards' with lines of poetry written on them..."

Haruaki walked to the kitchen while hearing the voice of Kuroe's explanations. Konoha was currently washing the dishes.

"Let me help as well."

"Oh dear, Haruaki-kun. I don't mind doing this myself at all."

"Don't say that. After all, it's New Year's Eve. If I slack off on the last day, it feels like I slacked off an entire year."

"Ufufu, that sounds reasonable enough. Then thank you very much, I'll be relying on your help."

Then Haruaki and Konoha stood before the kitchen sink and started to wash the dishes together. For quite a while, they worked silently without saying a word, but...

"I guess... Right now, I'm suddenly confronted again with the feeling that this year is about to end~"

"Fufu, making such a remark while doing the dishes, that's really something you'd do, Haruaki-kun."

"R-Really? I'm not too sure either. Oh by the way..."

Suddenly, Haruaki recalled what he needed to say to Konoha. Although it felt slightly embarrassing, this was a good opportunity because the new year was arriving several hours later.

"Uh... In other words, I'd like to thank you for the entire year. Not just for this type of domestic chores, but also other areas where you've helped me tons. I'm really grateful to you."

"Eh!? O-Oh dear."

The dish she was washing jumped lightly. Konoha glanced sideways at Haruaki. Due to feeling shy, Haruaki did not look back at her. Next, he heard a gulping sound from Konoha's throat.

"...Thank you. Although I don't feel like I've helped you especially..."

"No, really. I seriously feel that it's wonderful to have you here, Konoha."

"Fufu... It'd be lovely if that really were the case. Then I'll be very, very happy... Yes, simply hearing that from you, Haruaki-kun, makes me feel very blissful."

That's going a bit far—Haruaki thought, but at the same time, he knew that Konoha's words came straight from the heart. Feeling even more embarrassed, Haruaki sped up his dishwashing. Konoha seemed to make a wry smile.

"B-By the way, tonight's New Year spirit seems to be totally different from last year's."

"That's right. Kuroe-san... was also here last New Year's Eve. In that case, it really is the result of that child's presence. Really, there's never a moment of peace and quiet."

"Haha, but it's quite a refreshing change too. Just now, she even agreed to play karuta and is memorizing the rules right now. After the dishes, do you want to play together?"

"Wow~ That's really nostalgic. Very well, I'll show her what it means to be experienced... Oh no, I'm not trying to say I'm old, simply that regarding things that have been present since the past, it's natural to be more familiar as a result of longtime contact!"

"I know I know, you don't need to try so hard to explain! Anyway, please show some mercy. To be honest, the scene surfacing in my mind consists of a battle between a drill and your hand above the cards. No matter how easily accessible the cards may be, I wouldn't dare reach out with my hand!"

"Ooh. I-I will keep things appropriate... Say, will Kuroe-san really teach her the correct rules? That's a bit worrying. That child's ignorance has already reached the point where it's necessary to state explicitly beforehand that 'attacking others directly is forbidden.'"

"Also today is apparently the first time she's heard of karuta... Hmm, I'm beginning to feel worried too. Will Kuroe teach Fear properly?"

The two chatted while finishing the dishes, then turned off the faucet tightly. At this moment, they could now faintly hear the voices from the living room that had been covered by the noise of the water.

"Those are basically the rules. Let's try practicing now. I'll be in charge of reading while you find the matching card as quickly as possibly and grab it, Ficchi."

"Okay, leave it to me."

"Then let's start. «Noble Princess / 'Guh, to think these lowly peasants dare do this to me...' / Despite saying that»~ Okay, find the «Noble» card!"

"N-Noble... Got it, this is the one!"

"Nice reaction speed. Next comes the second card. «Knight Maiden / Just because the opponent is a slime / Do not underestimate»~"

"Knight, right... Knight? Th-There's none, oh there! Since it's a knight, there should be a weapon wielded, is this the one? No wait, that's the «Despite» card."

"That card reads «Despite being a warrior / Once fallen in enemy hands / She is nothing but an ordinary woman», right? As for the hint on the card, I remember there's a drawing of a translucent monster with tentacles, entangling a girl clad in armor..."

"..."

Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances with twitching faces.

Clearly before worrying about the rules, the greatest issue lay in Kuroe's set of cards.

Seeing the cards put back into the box again, Kuroe made an exaggerated expression of sadness, hanging her head gloomily. Drained of strength, she sipped the tea brewed by Haruaki.

"It's not every day that I specially take out my prized «Dark Fantasy Karuta» deck, wanting to play with everyone... To think I'd fall to improper censorship from above, what an utter shame~"

"This is proper censorship! Th-Those indecent cards can't possibly pass, of course! What were you thinking!?"

"Damn Cow Tits, it took me so much effort to memorize the rules, yet here you go with your tyranny... That said, is that deck of cards really that shameless in content? To be honest, I couldn't really understand the drawings and writings on them."

"Do you wanna know? C'mere, for example, the first card is..."

Kuroe whispered discreetly into Fear's ear. Fear started off nodding then suddenly her cheeks went red.

"W-What, that's really too... too shameless! You shameless brat!"

"Eh? Why did the conversation just now suddenly develop into pointing your drill at me!?"

"This is my feeling! Shameless things are basically all your fault!"

"Totally incomprehensible and unreasonable to an astounding degree!"

"Also for the second card, the main point is the special ability gained by improved slime breeds..."

"Enough, that's enough for the two of you! In any case, we're not going to play with that deck anymore, so it doesn't matter if you don't understand the meanings! This topic of conversation is over!"

Konoha slammed the table repeatedly to prevent Kuroe from continuing her explanations. Fear pouted unhappily and turned the drill back into the Rubik's cube. Konoha exhaled in exhaustion and said:

"Phew... If it weren't for that peculiar deck, I wouldn't actually complain. Kuroe-san, don't you have any ordinary cards?"

"At least not in my room! What about you, Haru?"

"Hmm~ I don't think I have any in my room either... But there very well could be some in the cupboard there. I remember that all the old toys are gathered there."

"Ohoh! Then let me try searching. If there's a set of karuta, that'll be just right, but I don't really mind other New Year games."

Saying that, Fear crawled out of the kotatsu and started to rummage through the cupboard in the living room. But despite reaching with her body into the cupboard, all she could find were old instruction manuals for household appliances, hourglasses, bear-shaped paperweights and other random things. It looked like Fear really wanted a game for passing time. Despite the small mountain of objects by her feet, none of them matching her search, she continued to search the cupboard singlemindedly.

Singlemindedly.

Hence, when a certain object appeared from the depths of the cupboard, she was completely unprepared for the unexpected shock.

In fact, upon further contemplation, Fear's instances of surprise were not particularly numerous in relation to this home.

Because this home was the facility that existed for the purpose of accepting cursed tools.

The unbelievable object that Fear had pulled out from the bottom of the cupboard—

Gave off loud laughter.

"Ee~ Heeheehee Oohyahahahaha!"

"Nwah~!?"

While screaming, Fear took out her Rubik's cube from her pocket and turned it into the massive drill again, pointing it against the object that had fallen from the cupboard.

"Oh... Excuse me~, umm, Fear?"

"H-Haruaki! Oh no, it's appeared! A cursed tool has appeared! Why are you making such a stupid expression? Can't you see that thing!"

Fear pressed the drill against the object and only turned her head while screaming at him in panic. Haruaki half-narrowed his eyes.

"...A cursed tool? You mean that thing?"

"D-Duh. I've never seen such a strange tool before. Can you help me check it out? Okay, check very carefully..."

Fear slowly approached and poked the old cloth bag with the tip of her drill.

Then—

"Geha, guhahauhya!"

"S-See, look, I'm not mistaken! Although I've no right to say this of others, this tool is too evil and incomprehensible...! How could you leave something like this so unguarded, shameless brat, you should have better danger awareness than that, right!? Hey you, by the way, you've gained self-awareness? If you have, answer me, who are you!?"

"Oh~ Excuse me... Fear."

"What!?"

I'll poke this guy to death instantly if anything happens—That was the kind of tension expressed by Fear's dainty face while she glared sharply at Haruaki and the rest of them. Drats, it'll be over if I accidentally burst out laughing. I must endure. As a side note, Konoha and Kuroe were currently bowing their heads with their hands covering their mouths, apparently on the verge of exploding, their shoulders shaking violently.

"...Uhh... Well, that's not a cursed tool. It's a kind of toy called a laughing bag. It used to be quite popular a long time ago."

"What? It's a toy? ...What's so fun about making a bag laugh?"

"W-Who knows?"

On further thought, Haruaki could not help but agree that Fear's doubts were perfectly reasonable. Why would this kind of thing become popular?

In any case, Fear seemed to accept the explanation. "Damn it, how dare you scare me!" She kicked the laughing bag lightly, thus producing "Uhyahahaha!" "S-Shut up!" At the same time, she resumed searching the cupboard.

"Haha... At least it confirms that you've reached the old toys zone. Perhaps there will be karuta cards nearby."

"H-Hmm. I was searching for a deck of karuta to begin with, so let's ignore this incomprehensible toy for now. Since you said it's nearby, let me look again—"

At this moment, another object dropped out from the cupboard that Fear was searching with a thud.

A thick piece of cardboard with a person's face on it. However, the eyes and nose parts were no longer in their proper positions.

Fear's entire body jumped. Then slowly, she turned her head and spoke in absolute seriousness:

"...Careful. This time, it really could be an evil and cursed tool for sacrificial rituals."

In the end, New Year's Eve was spent playing Old Maid with an old deck of cards that Fear had found in the cupboard. If it were just ordinary playing cards, Kuroe probably had them as well, but this was basically being

adaptable. During breaks in between, Fear also tried playing with evil sacrificial ritual tool (the Lucky Laugh^[4]) or poking the laughing bag, so all in all, it felt like quite a traditional way to pass time during New Year's. As a side note, after arranging the Lucky Laugh, Fear produced a monster whose facial features rivaled those depicted in Picasso's paintings.

"Hmm... How about this card? Ugh!"

"Huhaha~! Quite a shame, Haruaki, that's the old maid! Next, I'll show you my true power... I'll draw this one! Yes, I finally win for once, it feels great! Kukuku, you've been deceived by my perfect strategy!"

"Aren't you lowering your head because your expressions keep betraying your secrets...!?"

"This isn't your first victory but simply your first time to avoid finishing in last place."

"Cow Tits, shut up!"

"But losing is losing, no matter what. It's finally my turn to shuffle the deck huh... Oh, it's already this late."

The clock's hands pointed to half past eleven. Normally, this would be bedtime pretty much. Rather, since Haruaki was essentially an early sleeper, most of the time, he would already be in bed by this time.

"You can't be suggesting it's time to sleep now, are you? I don't wanna go to bed! One more time, another game!"

"After all, in a certain sense, this is the only day of the year when an all-nighter is acceptable~ Say, is it really okay to keep playing cards on this special occasion? Not sleeping is fine, but don't you feel hungry?"

"Now that you mention it, that's true."

"I'm hungry~"

"Yeah, let me go prepare."

"Nunu, on a normal day, clearly you'd only nag at me and say I'm craving rice crackers for a midnight snack again..."

"That's because today is a special occasion. Although we stole ahead a little, since we've played cards already and it's almost New Year's anyway,

it should be fine... Let's have the rice cake soup that I already finished cooking earlier."^[5]

"Rice cake soup? I've no idea what it is, but I'll accept as long as it's tasty!" Haruaki listened to Fear's remark as he walked to the kitchen. As usual, Konoha went over to help with preparations. In actual fact, Haruaki had spent the daytime preparing a whole array of New Year cooking apart from rice cake soup. Even Haruaki himself found it a bit excessive. Had he told Taizou and Kana about his cooking, they would surely have made fun of him, saying "What a housewife!?" Of course, Konoha also helped him a lot during his New Year cooking... Haruaki really felt grateful to her.

Taking the reheated rice cake soup on a tray, Haruaki returned to the living room. The Yachi family's rice cake soup consisted of standard fare including rice cakes, chicken, carrots and fish cakes cooked in broth. Although the outward appearance was not especially dazzling, Haruaki did put a lot of effort into the flavor instead. Hence, having tried rice cake soup for the first time, Fear offered a passing grade in her comment for the soup.

"Mu, nyo~... These rice cakes are so stretchy~ ...Munch munch. Pwah~ But this is really tasty, what good rice cakes!"

"Are you trying to say there are bad rice cakes? Say, can't you be more quiet when eating?"

"Bad rice cakes? Of course they exist, I even know them! Not only are they poor tasting and inedible, they are also rice cakes that are completely useless. They're also giant beyond necessity, both an eyesore and quite shameless, and especially enjoy living as parasites on the bodies of stupid girls. Sometimes, they even whisper: 'hehehe, before long, I'll have sucked up all the intelligence from this host...' One could call them mankind's natural enemy—"

"Oh, I can hear it! I can hear it right now, Ficchi~!"

"What! That's no good, the Earth is in danger!"

"What's wrong with you two... On this occasion when the year is about to end, you're even going as far as to treat these as living creatures!?"

Konoha was right, the year was about to end. As Haruaki watched the usual bickering unfold, he could not help but smile, meanwhile changing television channels casually. There were variety shows with celebrities

making exaggerated grinning faces, talk shows, as well as news programmes calmly delivering weather reports of "a rapidly forming low pressure zone is approaching Japan, rain on a national scale is probable in the afternoon..." Heavy rain right on New Year's, how troubling... Hence, Haruaki paid slightly more attention to that weather forecast. Soon after, the news on the screen switched to images of a great bell sounding repeatedly for New Year's Eve. Quieting down was a good thing, but Haruaki was beginning to feel sleepy.

At least during the New Year's countdown, some lively noise would be better. Hence, Haruaki picked a variety show. After finishing her rice cake soup, Fear sat down in front of the television as though attracted by the hustle and bustle.

"Uumuu, I somehow feel a bit nervous... Oh, it's counting down for the minute now?"

Fear gulped and stared at the television screen. A gentle expression on her face, Konoha rested her jaw on her hands with her elbows on the kotatsu tabletop. On the other hand, Kuroe was thinking something (with great certainty, she must be thinking if something fun could be done during this one minute) with sleepy-looking eyes while staring at the television. As Haruaki watched the girls, mesmerized, the final minute of the year was passing away with incredible speed. Then—

"Five... Four, three, two, one... Zero!"

In tune with Fear's whispers, fireworks lit up in the television screen. The guest celebrities' smiling faces. The audience's loud applause. The brightly colored onscreen captions. "Wow~" Fear's mouth gaped as she watched all these lively and festive images.

"Okay, a new year has started again... So, Happy New Year to everyone."

"Happy New Year's greetings to you, Haruaki-kun."

"Happy New Year! Haru, I continue to be in your care this year."

After exchanging New Year greetings with Konoha and Kuroe, Haruaki looked towards Fear.

"You too, Happy New Year."

"Muu. Although I don't really know what's the difference after starting a new year... However, this is considered a kind of ritual, right? Then let me say, Happy New Year."

Fear nodded as she spoke. Haruaki smiled wryly and stood up, saying "Then up next is..."

"Where are you going? Are you making the first toilet visit for the new year?"

"Of course not. I mentioned it during the day, right? We set off once the new year arrives. Just now, the weather forecast said there might be rain in the afternoon, so let's get going. Although you don't need to rush, let's start getting ready, everyone."

"Come to think of it, I did hear you say something like that... But I forgot afterwards, because when you said 'once the new year arrives,' I thought surely you meant going out after a night's rest. Then where are we going in the middle of the night?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Haruaki smiled. This was probably another first experience for Fear—and for Haruaki and the rest, it was something that could only be done once a year—a customary New Year's event.

"This is the New Year's first shrine visit."

Chapter 1 - What Does One Do on New Year's Day?

/ "Of course, the first visit... and the first curse"

Part 1

After getting ready to go out, Haruaki and company took a taxi. A bit of laziness during the New Year's first shrine visit hopefully did not warrant divine retribution. Sitting in the car, Fear displayed great enthusiasm on her face while she kept looking in all directions at the scenery of the streets at night outside the window.

"Wow, there's so many people! Even though it's clearly the middle of the night, yet legitimately walking outside, this feels so exciting!"

"Yeah~ This scene only happens once a year on this day... Oh, excuse me, mister driver, please take a right at the next intersection."

The destination for their New Year's first visit was a shrine located outside of town. This was not the one near home where Haruaki had gone with Sovereignty once or the shrine where mysterious masked girls had appeared during the autumn festival. However, rather than stopping in front of the shrine, the taxi stopped at the parking lot of a convenience store a certain distance away. After paying the fare, the group got off the taxi.

"Ohoh, Kirika! I wish you a Happy New Year!"

"Haha... Happy New Year, Fear-kun. Likewise to everyone else."

Kirika was there, waiting to meet up with them. When sending a Happy New Year text message, Haruaki had invited her along as well, so that was why she also came.

"Class Rep, I'm sorry for inviting you so last-minute."

"Don't worry, I was just thinking what I should do for the New Year's first shrine visit, so it works out perfectly... Say, you didn't invite Kana and Taizou?"

"I asked them but they've already agreed to go with their families. As for Sovereignty and Shiraho, they didn't respond."

"I texted Sovey-chan too but didn't get an answer. Maybe they've already gone to bed?"

The group chatted while walking towards the shrine. As expected of late night, the wind was really chilly—but Haruaki was already fully prepared for winter. The warm scarf and warm sweater were the Christmas presents he had received from Fear and Konoha respectively. Also, Haruaki was not the only person with proper winter gear.

"Oh... Fear-kun, your gloves are so cute. They look very warm."

"Yeah, they're very warm! Let me share this warmth with you, Kirika. Here you go."

Fear took her gloves and clamped them around Kirika's cheeks, rubbing them to generate heat. Kirika half-closed her eyes as though she were ticklish. Haruaki was glad to see Fear make effective use of Santa's gift. Wonderful. As a side note, Haruaki's present for Konoha was an artist's artbook that she had once mentioned as too expensive; for Kuroe, he had given her an alarm clock to convey a message of "I hope you do your best and never be late for work." Conversely, she had given Haruaki a complete set of kitchen knives as though saying "Do your best with the cooking."

(Come to think of it, a lot also happened... during the Christmas party...)

Haruaki recalled the lively scene from back then. To Kirika, Sovereignty and Shiraho whom he had invited at short notice, Haruaki also gave token little gifts as a gesture of thanks for their everyday support. Haruaki's present for Sovereignty and Shiraho was a pair of matching plush dolls while Sovereignty reciprocated with a gift set of deluxe cream puffs. Haruaki accepted her pastry with endless gratitude. On the other hand, Shiraho smiled with unparalleled radiance, saying: "This is my present. Please don't be shy and eat without reserve." What she handed over was a handful of freshly picked weeds (originating from an empty field on the roadside). This present was discarded with endless gratitude.

At this moment, Kirika coordinated with Haruaki's pace and walked beside him.

"By the way, Yachi... Umm, thank you for a few days ago. Also, I'm sorry but because it was too sudden, all I could prepare was something like that."

"Oh, you mean the mugs? Don't worry, it's totally okay... Rather, it came in handy at the right time. There were some cups that broke earlier so we don't actually have enough. Sometimes when I want to drink coffee, I had to make do with a teacup instead."

Haruaki spoke while recalling Kirika's present, a mug set with various colorful designs. After all, he was the one who invited people to the party at the last minute so he actually felt quite apologetic about it. Furthermore, there was another matter that Haruaki felt apologetic about.

"Say, I'm sorry I gave you a mug as well. Although I've already said this during the party, who could have thought that we'd end up giving the same kind of gift?"

"N-No, it's fine. It happens that the mug I'm using is already quite old... There's no problem at all. In fact, I am using your gift."

"Really? That's great to know."

Kirika spoke rapidly in panic for some reason. Haruaki nodded. But then Kirika murmured in an even softer voice.

"However... Giving each other the same gift, that can be thought of as... connected hearts and minds...? No no, to think I'd get so happy over such a trivial thing... How absolutely ridiculous..."

"Hmm? Class Rep, did you say something?"

"N-Nothing at all!"

"Hey, Haruaki, it's been bothering me for a while. What is that bamboo spear lookalike I sometimes see on the entrance of people's homes? I was thinking it's some kind of trap but there's no point unless it's installed at the bottom of a pit, right? Anyway, it looks quite dangerous."

"That's the New Year's pine decoration! It's not a trap but an ornament that symbolizes good luck, okay!"

While chatting, the group continued walking on their way.

The closer they got to the shrine, the more obvious increasing density of surrounding crowds became. The destination shrine was located on the side of a small hill. The shrine's confines could only be reached by ascending a long set of stairs. Watching the crowd of pilgrims packed shoulder to shoulder, moving up and down the stone steps, Fear stared with her eyes wide.

"What... It's clearly so late, but why are there so many people?"

"This is the power of the New Year's first shrine visit. Only on this day do the number of nocturnal people rise."

"Granted that's true, there's really huge crowds out and about. Everyone, please be careful not to get separated."

"Yeah. In any case, let's go. Be careful not to lose your footing on the stone steps. But even if you take a misstep, it'll just end up as my chance to show off."

"Wait... Kuroe-san, stop saying that while circling to my back! You're planning to grab my bottom again, aren't you!? I absolutely won't take a wrong step, so please relax!"

Then the group ascended the stone steps and stepped into the shrine's vast territory. At this moment, Fear halted in astonishment again.

"Th-This smell, this hustle and bustle, plus the stall vendors... This is basically a festival! It's no different from the festivals I've gone to before! So what you call the New Year's first shrine visit is just a festival!?"

"It's not a wrong description~ Hold it right there, let's browse the vendors afterwards! Afterwards!"

Haruaki frantically grabbed Fear just as she was drawn by the roasted corn vendor, trying to walk there with a mesmerized expression on her face, despite the clear warning just now not to get separated.

"Listen carefully, the New Year's first shrine visit is indeed quite similar to a festival, but it's no ordinary festival. We still have many other things we need to do. That's the main purpose of the New Year's first shrine visit. Definitely not checking out the stall vendors."

"Muu~ Then what do we need to do?"

"Many things. Anyway, let's pay homage first. Then we can walk around."

"Paying homage means doing that thing we did at the festival last time? Ringing the bell and the like."

"Yes yes. And the meaning of paying homage today is a wish for everything to go smoothly in the coming year."

"Hmm. Okay, in that case, it can't be helped. Then let's hurry."

Despite pouting with dissatisfaction, Fear accepted Haruaki's proposal. Konoha and the rest had no objections. Hence, the group made their way towards the shrine's main building ahead along the visiting road. However, the density of people at the main building was even higher than anything they had encountered thus far.

"Gwah~ I'm about to be swept away!"

"Hey, Fear, pull yourself together and follow us closely! Here, toss the offering money!"

"...This is really... tough. Kuroe-san, are you okay? Be careful you don't get flattened."

"I'm fine. If there's any danger, I will use the cushion~"

"Cushion... What? Hey, Kuroe-san, you're targeting my body again, right!?"

"A-Anyway, I just need to toss this out, right... Here I go! B-But it's impossible to make a wish like this! This is completely different from the other festival!"

After braving great hardship to pay their homage, Haruaki's group managed to escape the crowd in front of the offering box. Although it was expected beforehand, they still found themselves squeezed senseless by the crowd.

"Phew... What the heck? The New Year's first shrine visit is like a war?"

"Indeed, this year seems to be even more packed than last year. It's really because the weather report said it'd rain today in the afternoon, I guess? Like us, many people probably plan on paying homage during this time to get it over with as early as possible."

"Probably. What's next?"

"Okay, just to make sure we don't forget, let's go buy talismans."

Hence the group made their way towards a small structure by the side of the main building. Although it was also quite crowded and bustling there, it was not as excessive as in front of the offering box. Welcomed by the smiles of part-time shrine maidens, Fear looked at the talismans laid out in a row.

"Hmm, even the cheapest ones are 500 yen...? That's quite expensive. Since there are different prices, does it mean that the more expensive a talisman the more effective it is?"

"Let's not dwell too deep on that point. After all, these are lucky charms. I think any is fine as long as you buy one. So, which one should I buy..."

"I want this one."

Fear swiftly pointed towards one of the talismans.

"Just in case, let me ask you a question. Do you actually know what's written there?"

"Of course. I'm not too sure about the last two words but I have a faint idea of the top two."

Then there was no problem. In a certain sense, it was only natural for Fear to buy that talisman. Smiling wryly, Haruaki paid for the talisman bearing the words "Great Wishes Comes True." As soon as Haruaki reminded her, "Don't lose it", Fear stuffed the talisman into her coat pocket. Next, Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe respectively bought talismans for "Safety for the Whole Family," "Academic Success" and "Wish for Safe Childbirth." Naturally, it was completely obvious who had bought the last one... But was it really okay to spend 500 yen for a joke?

"Oh my~ This is wonderful. I managed to buy a talisman that suits me very well. Next is... Hmm, the o-mikuji fortune telling. Let's hurry and draw our fortunes~"

"I'll just ignore that in various ways since I can't come up with a retort that's worth 500 yen. But you're right, let's go draw our fortunes."

"Okay, Ficchi, let's go. I'll pay for you."

"What are o-mikuji fortunes?"

"What a great question. O-mikuji is the first luck-testing contest of the incoming year. First you put in a 100 yen coin here, then you pour forth all the energy of your body and soul to draw a piece of paper—Based on the rank you receive, it decides on the winners and losers for an entire year's luck!"

"What apart from the battle at the offering box just now, there's another huh... I knew it, the New Year's first shrine visit is quite a battle-oriented

activity! Okay, Kuroe, demonstrate to me first. Kirika, you can draw first too. I want to see what will come up."

Approaching the o-mikuji box on the stand, Kuroe inserted a 100 yen coin then reached into the box to mix up the contents for a while—

"Heya! Uh... Hmm, it's Middle Fortune."

"What rank does Middle Fortune count as?"

"Not bad at all, but it's not the best, so I might still lose! So, the inside reads.. «Running a Business: Working Seriously Means Fortune» huh? Muu... If it were «Boundless Wealth and Prosperity Arrives, No Working Required», that'd be better."

"A fortune can't possibly suggest people to become depraved, okay!"

"Haha, then let me draw first... Hmm, I got Middle Fortune as well. Pretty ordinary, I guess. A-Although it's absolutely ridiculous, I'll open it up for a look as well. Let me see... «Singleminded Effort Is Enough», what's that supposed to mean...? Does it imply hope? Or is it tactfully...!"

For some reason, Kirika stared intently at the inner text of the fortune paper and murmured emphatically. Haruaki secretly puzzled to himself: Was Class Rep really the type to take fortune telling seriously?

"So this means that Kirika and Kuroe have a tie. By the way, Kuroe, what's the lowest rank?"

"Probably Great Misfortune. But I don't know if they actually put it in, so Misfortune is generally the lowest rank available."

"Misfortune, simply the sound of that name sounds quite unlucky. The contents must be some kind of ominous prediction as well, such as «Running a Business: Shop Catches on Fire», or «Disease: Vomit Blood and Die Two Seconds Later», etc...! Things are over in all sorts of ways for someone who draws that kind of fortune. Even if there's a mistake somewhere and they survive somehow, confronted with people who drew good fortunes, these guys will surely live a whole year of inferiority, unable to hold their heads up high... Hehehe, how I look forward to it. Okay... Cow Tits, let's see who's the winner! You're on!"

"W-Why are you suddenly getting so excited!?"

Since Konoha had inserted a 100 yen coin and reached into the o-mikuji box already, the troublesome thing was that "not drawing" was no longer an option for her. After hesitating for a while, she finally gulped as though resolving herself. Then she carefully moved her hand through the o-mikuji paper. Of course, Fear was standing behind Konoha, arms raised and bent in hook shapes, trying to give off mental waves of evil: "Misfortune... Misfortune... Great.. Misfortune...!"

Several seconds later, Konoha suddenly widened her eyes.

"Here! This is the one!"

Then she drew her hand out. Using a motion akin to flicking her finger, she pointed thumb towards her abdomen and gently sliced open the o-mikuji paper's seal with the power of her knife hand. Then with incomparably serious eyes, she gazed upon what was written on the paper—

She smiled proudly.

"Fufu! Everyday good deeds don't go unrewarded after all... I got Great Fortune!"

"What did you say...!?"

Faced with Fear's astonishment, Konoha puffed out her chest proudly.

"Fear-san, you really dug your own grave. All because you keep trying to put down others, this happened. Oh dear, Great Fortune really is quite nice. There was also quite lucky things written inside... Well then, Fear-san, it's your turn next, right? What did you just say? I recall you saying something about losers in this o-mikuji contest being unable to hold their heads high in front of the winners? What a great idea, let's compete. Come, please draw your fortune... Ufufu."

Smiling calmly, Konoha nimbly switched positions with where Fear was standing.

"Ugh, you damn Cow Tits... Making me so mad this early in the new year...!"

"Ficchi, good luck~! With this, your only hope is a tie... Don't worry, you can do it since you're Ficchi! Probably!"

Kuroe tossed in the 100 yen coin for Fear. With that, everything was ready. Fear bit her lower lip and prayed hard as she drew the o-mikuji paper.

Supposing Fear drew Misfortune this time, that would be the worst case scenario. Although Fear deserved it, Haruaki hoped at least that this would not end up starting a feud. If it came up as Middle Fortune, he could say "What a shame" and smooth things over with a smile. A tie would be even better.

(W-What's the result...?)

Rip, Fear nervously tore open the o-mikuji paper's seal, then slowly looked at what was written inside—

But at this moment, Fear went "Hmm?" and cocked her head in puzzlement.

"Kuroe, I've drawn a fortune that's a bit strange. However, I can recognize the word 'fortune' at least."

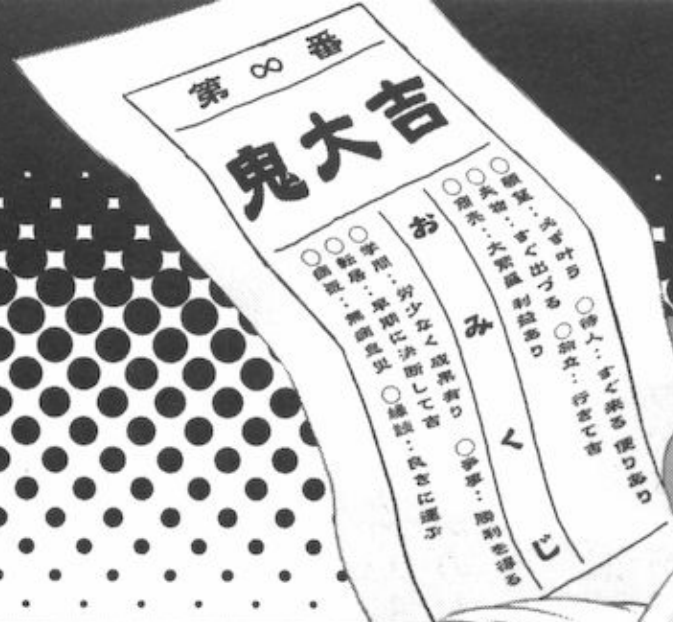
"Oh... Is it Future Fortune?"

"No, it isn't, there are three words. I know this word. If I read it literally—"

Fear proceeded to speak in a doubtful tone of voice:

"Devil's Great Fortune—Those are the three words."

"What is that!?"



"It's real." Fear showed them the o-mikuji paper. Haruaki took it while Konoha and the rest leaned forward to examine it.

"Uh, it's real. What is this?"

"I've never heard of it either..."

Indeed, the three words—"Devil's Great Fortune"—were written there. The contents were all good things such as "Wishes: Definitely Come True" or "Disease: None, Disaster Avoided."

"This is too good to be true, one can't help but feel skeptical..."

"After all, some shrines also have 'Great Great Fortune' too~ This could be an original type innovated by this shrine!"

"Even so, the word 'devil' shouldn't be used, right!? Simply because of the literal impression!"

"I don't quite get it, but this means I have the devil's own luck, right!? Hmph hmph... How unfortunate, Cow Tits, your despicable intentions have fallen apart utterly! This time, it's my victory without a doubt!"

"H-How could that be possible... No wait, it must be that, someone may have thrown it in as a prank!"

Just as Konoha frantically objected, a couple that had been standing in line after Fear took their turn to draw. This couple consisted of a man and a woman whose appearances were quite out of place in a shrine. The man was wearing a leather jacket with a skull emblem and the words "Go To Hell!!!" on it while the woman had heavy makeup. Next, their dialogue could be heard—

"Wow, it's Devil's Great Fortune!" "What's that?" "You didn't know? There's a rumor on the internet that starting this year, Devil's Great Fortune will be added to this shrine's o-mikuji. Getting it is just awesome~"

Konoha slumped her shoulders with incomparable dejection.

"Hmph hmph, Cow Tits, I admit that your Great Fortune is quite a good result. Had your opponent not been me, you'd surely win—Don't be offended, blame my luck for being too good! Yes! No matter what, a win is a win. A full year would be excessive, but at least let me gloat for today! Wahaha!"

"Guh..."

"O-Okay okay, why don't we just think of it as both of you drawing good fortunes? I almost forgot, let me draw one as well. Then our task is almost complete. Afterwards, we can take our time to watch performances and visit the vendors—"

After all, New Year's and the first shrine visit only came around once a year. Haruaki did not want anyone to be upset by a dispute and hoped they could all enjoy themselves. In order to make Fear and Konoha forget about the o-mikuji contest, Haruaki casually drew a fortune.

"..."

Who knew if it were a prank from the god of probability or perhaps good things went to those who were not greedy...

The three words—"Devil's Great Fortune"—were also written on the fortune that Haruaki had drawn.

Part 2

From the girl's standpoint, this had nothing to do with her.

From her family's standpoint, however, today was the busiest day in the entire year. There was no doubt about this fact.

However, she was not working. Because she knew that her family's work did not actually need her help. In the living room of her home behind the shrine office, she was sitting on a seat cushion, staring down blankly at the piece of paper in her hand.

A few lines of organized handwriting recorded what she needed to do and pay attention to. However, the writings ended with—"Don't force yourself too much. Just do it whenever you have the time."

Still with a lost expression, she gently traced her fingertips without particular intent over those words. Both beautiful and carefully written, the handwriting had become all too familiar a long time ago, furthermore—

It was quite nostalgic too.

Narrowing her eyes, she shook her head lightly as though disapproving of this kind of mood for herself. Next, she hugged the piece of paper tightly to her chest before carefully folding it up and putting it in her pocket.

Sighing, she then turned on the television in a lethargic manner and randomly picked a channel, staring at the screen. Her blank gaze was identical to earlier but carried a slightly different significance. Currently, her eyes expressed purely the sentiment of being bored out of her mind.

At this moment, another person who had been standing ready on the side all this time spoke up:

"Please allow me to ask in fear and trepidation... Is it really okay for us to stay inside~?"

"Why must we go outside? That's the whole purpose of hiring part-timers, right? Those girls are more suited to the job than me... Hmph, having said 'suited,' who knows how many of them are actually virgins?"

She smiled in mockery. The other person inclined her head:

"A shrine maiden's virginity huh~ Regarding this aspect, I think a person's heart and soul can probably compensate for it~"

"Haha, my soul is absolutely the most filthy. In this regard, it's really best to leave things to them after all."

"Really~? By the way, let me ask just out of personal curiosity, what about your physical body...?"

"...Shut up."

The girl's gaze remained glued to the television as she extended her arm and pinched the face of the other person who was speaking slowly.

"Owww, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... It really hurts..."

"Hurting you is exactly the point. You deserve it for saying something so rude. This topic ends here. Capish?"

"Yes~"

Although the voice showed no signs of reflection or contrition, this was already a familiar sight. After one final twist, the girl finally released the other person's cheek. At this moment, a cellphone that was lying on the table began to vibrate. The LCD screen displayed an unfamiliar series of digits.

In that case, the caller's position was automatically identified.

A customer.

"Even on this kind of day... My side business can't possibly lack in customers."

The girl smiled once again, but with even more derision than before.

Picking up the phone casually without any haste, she began an conversation with a complete stranger.

"Yes—I am the curse expert. Do you have a request for a job?"

Part 3

Due to the shrine's location on the side of a small mountain, making judicious use of the geography naturally resulted in a rather vast expanse. Surrounding the visiting road was an area resembling a plaza where various activities were unexpectedly being carried out in addition to the vendor stalls. The local neighborhood association was apparently helping out as well. No matter which activity, all of them were crowded with enthusiastic participants. But sure enough, the real deal was probably going to start only after dawn. Hence, one could still participate after lining up briefly.

The first thing to catch Fear's attention was the New Year's calligraphy contest. Apart from penmanship, participants were also judged on the uniqueness of their subject matter as well as the vigor of their brush strokes and other criteria. The top few participants in each category would supposedly receive prizes another day. This was what Haruaki read from the display board explaining the prizes.

"The prizes include stuff like detergents. Despite being so ordinary, it's gratifying... But that's assuming we win a prize."

"No problem, leave it to us! Right? Kuroe!"

"Yeah, it looks quite interesting so let's try entering. Kono-san, you're joining too, of course?"

"O-Of course, I guess? Hmm, although I'm also quite familiar with brush calligraphy... It can't be helped, let's try participating. Haruaki-kun and Ueno-san, what about you two?"

"I don't have much confidence in brush calligraphy, so I'll leave it to you all."

"Same here, I really wouldn't dare call myself a calligraphy expert. I'll just observe from the side."

Hence, it was finally decided that the trio of Fear, Konoha and Kuroe would enter the contest. Sitting down at the tables prepared under the tent, they each gripped their brushes tightly while facing the rice paper before them. Naturally, the first to begin writing fluently in full composure was Konoha.

"Happy... New... Year's... Wishes... Basically something like this?"

Her calligraphy was quite beautiful. "Wow~ Miss, you write quite well!" The staff exclaimed, greatly impressed. Fear heard this just as she was dipping her brush into the inkstone and frowned with displeasure.

"Hmph... Writing those few words is so unoriginal. Granted, the writing is passable but really lacks in creativity. What you lack is called self-expression. In that case, you'll definitely not get number one... If you wanna write four words, I suggest you put down 'round, stout and rolling'! If you just wanna write one word, I simply suggest you write 'meat'!"

Just as Konoha's face twitched, Fear refused to admit defeat and wrote in one breath. Naturally, the four words that came out were—

"I. Love. Rice. Crackers... That's just awesome—!"

"What right have you to criticize me? What kind of self-expression is this!? All this expresses is your gluttony!"

Watching the girls while standing beside Haruaki, Kirika whispered as her shoulders shook lightly:

"Fufu... On the other hand, her brush strokes are truly full of vigor. They're filled with power."

"As for the neatness of the characters, it's so poor that even I can tell. Oh no! Fear's making a face as though something's missing while she's starting to examine the rice paper...! I know, she must be thinking that it'd look more tasty with the words 'sesame' or 'soy sauce' somewhere in there!"

Just as Haruaki watched with great worry as Fear acted as she pleased for her New Year's calligraphy, Kuroe, who had been writing her brush script leisurely all this time, finally held up her sheet of rice paper.

On it, a line was written: "So long as it's Onii-chan, I'm okay with it...!"

Very clearly, her main goal was aiming for uniqueness in subject matter. However, since that line was too unique, even Haruaki could easily predict that she was definitely not winning a prize.

From the way things looked, from the fortune drawing all the way to the New Year's calligraphy battle, Fear's contest of opposition was still persisting.

Haruaki pretended to be a stranger while watching the scene. Next came the mochi-making corner where participants could try their hand at the experience of making rice cakes.

"GO. AND. DIE—!"

"—Don't think... you'll win!"

"Hmph!"

"Hah!"

Pounding, kneading, hammering, more kneading.

The wooden mallet rose up and down, pounding the mochi rice paste while another person was kneading barehanded. Both processes were being performed at high speed. Swinging the wooden mallet with full strength was Fear while the one stirring the mochi fast enough to produce afterimages was Konoha.

"E-Excuse me... I've already reminded both of you many times, this is very dangerous. Please slow down a bit... Umm, please make sure that the other person's hands are withdrawn before pounding..."^[6]

Completely ignoring the staff's awkward reminders, the two girls continued to work the mochi with great intensity. At this moment, Fear suddenly made a feint, pausing for a beat before swinging the mallet down. Instantly, a strange sounding crack was heard. The staff's face went deathly pale in a flash.

Fear and Konoha stopped their motions while staring at each other fearlessly.

"...Well, isn't that quite amazing of you?"

"That's because you dodged despite my feint just now. This counts as a win and a loss each."

"This mass of mochi, don't you think it needs a bit more working?"

"Okay, a decisive victory must be decided this time..."

"U-Umm, didn't the mallet strike someone's hand just now...?"

Fear and Konoha simultaneously turned towards the staff with a most terrifying smile. Maintaining that smile, they declared: "What are you talking about? No one was struck at all." Then they continued pounding the mochi at high speed—But Haruaki saw it with his own eyes. At the tip of the wooden mallet in Fear's hands, there was a faint crack resembling a laceration from a sword.

"Power and technique combined, this mochi will definitely become very tasty."

"...Yeah, can't wait to see how it turns out..."

Haruaki could only answer helplessly in response to Kuroe's leisurely comment.

Eating the rice cakes obtained from the mochi-making experience corner, the group took a stroll within the shrine's confines.

"Muunyuu. Umuu, so tasty. And I won again, this feels great."

"I should be the final victor. Do note that I dodged in the very last instant!"

"What are you talking about!? Don't spout random nonsense or I'll curse you!"

"Okay, both of you calm down. After all, tasty rice cakes were made, that's good enough already..."

"Th-That's right, you both worked the mochi so seriously that the rice cakes have great elasticity. It's really delicious."

"Yeah, and in terms of ingredients, rice cakes are virtually the same as rice crackers. Ficchi, you should get a good taste of this."

"That's true, now that you mention it. Fine, I'll concentrate on eating the rice cakes first."

"Seriously... Ah, but these really do taste good."

Kirika and Kuroe also tried to smooth things over. Fear and Konoha's verbal dispute finally reached a ceasefire. Haruaki's group leisurely experienced the atmosphere of the New Year's first shrine visit through tasting various simple flavors. Inside the area of nostalgic New Year games, they casually watched spinning tops and stilts-walking performances. Meanwhile, they also finished eating their rice cakes.

"I'm so full! Eating to my full is all good and well, but I'm feeling thirsty now. That's because during the homage paying battle and the mochi competition, I exerted and sweated more than expected."

"Yeah~ Let's see if there's any place selling drinks..."

"Hold on, Haru. Since it's the New Year's first shrine visit, the timing's perfect. We should check out that place now."

Where Kuroe pointed to was a tent where amazake, a sweet low-alcohol drink made from fermented rice, was being served to shrine visitors. It was apparently the most popular spot, with many people gathered there despite the late hours.

"Hey Haruaki, does amazake literally mean sweet-tasting sake as its name suggests?"

"It's not sake but just a drink with that name."

"Called sake but not actually sake, that's totally mind boggling. But since it's got the word 'sweet' in its name, it can't be bad tasting. I wanna try some!"

"Hmm... Although it suits the occasion, is it really okay?"

"The alcohol content should be quite low, probably something like whiskey-filled chocolate. Seeing as it can help warm the body and it's not something that minors are barred from drinking, I think it should be fine."

"Since Class Rep says so, I guess it's fine. Okay, let's go over... Hmm, Konoha, why do you look so unsettled?"

"Eh? I-I don't look unsettled at all. Ahaha~"

Konoha made a rather fake laugh. Despite feeling puzzled, Haruaki went along with the plan and lined up in front of the amazake tent. Not long after, they finished lining up and successfully obtained the amazake served in paper cups.

"There's a distinctive flavor... Will it taste good?"

"I don't expect it to be good enough to knock your socks off with the taste, but how should I put it...? It's a very flavorful taste, though that's a weird description too."

"Hmm..."

Fear stared intently at the paper cup before throwing her head back and downing the amazake in one gulp. Crap! Haruaki had forgotten to remind her that amazake should not be drunk in one breath.

"Fear, how do you find the taste?"

"Pwah~ M-Muu, this... is really... A flavorful taste... However, I don't dislike it. Let's try another. Burp!"

"...Burp?"

Haruaki suddenly felt a rather ominous premonition but Fear had already lined up at the amazake tent again. After all, a banner said "Refills welcomed" so there should not be a particular need to stop her. Nevertheless—

"What's going on? Somehow I get the feeling that someone is saying to me that it'd be wise to take this opportunity to stop her..."

"Yachi, what a coincidence. I feel the same too."

Kirika took small sips of amazake while murmuring to herself. Just at this moment—

"Uh~ Actually, I'm feeling the same ominous premonition too. However, the reason is probably slightly different from Haru and Kiririn's. No wait, rather than different, it's more like there's an additional reason for worry."

Kuroe walked over and tugged Haruaki's sleeve. Following her gaze—Haruaki was rendered speechless while agreeing with Kuroe from the bottom of his heart. Worrying. Truly worrying. Rather, he should have done everything he could to stop that person, but it was clearly too late now.

Haruaki had failed to notice all this time.

Next to the amazake booth was a tent carrying the sign "New Year's Spiced Sake." Over there—a glasses-wearing girl with twin braids had just successfully obtained the sake of the gods and was about to bring it to her lips.

Part 4

The girl owned a set of workclothes. An outfit that was simultaneously both suited and unsuited to helping with her family's line of work. But for the sake of her side business, she had no choice but to wear this set of clothing.

Inside her messy room, she finished changing and preparing for her work. Glancing at the time displayed on her computer, she twisted her lips.

"The time is really just right, so let's head out..."

Just as she opened her room door and was about to start walking, she suddenly felt perplexed. Footsteps were supposed to follow her but she did not hear any. Turning her head back to look into the room, she heard at this moment—

A bell ringing, almost imperceptibly like a hallucination.

"...A divine oracle?"

Her brief question elicited a slow nod from the other girl who was still inside the room. The girl lightly put down the her hands that had been positioned by her ears as though to facilitate listening.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... However, it's very short."

"What did it say?"

"Some interlopers will be arriving."

The first girl took the words at face value and did not ponder them any deeper. This was because she knew that even if she demanded what these words meant, there was no way to obtain additional information. Furthermore, the person who provided this news did not know any further information apart from what she had just said.

"Oh..."

The girl answered vaguely and spontaneously glanced again at the time displayed on the computer screen.

The witching hour.

This was only natural—The girl thought. It was also not surprising that someone would arrive to interfere with the act that was about to be performed at such hours, the act best suited to be performed at such hours. The other party was in the right. They were in the wrong.

Hence, she must do this.

In the end, there was no change to the act that followed next.

—Except, as preparation prior to starting the job, she added more to the tools she was taking from her room.

Part 5

Naturally, Haruaki was not able to make it in time.

There was a resting zone near the tents where quite a number of chairs were set up. This place was currently occupied by drunks.

"Kukuku, ahahaha! Amazake... so sweet~ Isn't it? Burp!"

"Hey Fear, that's why I told you to stop drinking! Stop pouring amazake down your throat!"

"Phew... Why do I feel... So hot... Is it because of the heat from the lighting!?"

"Konoha, don't fan your skirt even if you're feeling hot! It's very dangerous in various ways!"

"How is it... dangerous... huh? Ah, it really feels so hot... My thighs must be all red... Wanna look?"

"Of course not!"

"Eh? D-Does that mean... you wanna lick...?"

"I-I don't want to lick it either! What are you talking about!?"

For some reason, Konoha found this conversation hilarious and started laughing with her shoulders shaking. What a disaster, the long-absent drunk Konoha had reappeared. Of course, Haruaki would never allow her to drink alcohol at home. Were they at the shrines near home, she would still suppress her urge to drink because of acquaintances at the neighborhood association, but unfortunately, this was a different and unfamiliar neighborhood association. Upon seeing her well-developed figure and mature comportment, it was quite improbable that they would deem her a minor and refuse to serve her the spiced sake. Perhaps due to high spirits from the New Year's first shrine visit or in an effort to relieve the frustrations from competing with Fear, Konoha probably thought that "drinking just a little should be okay" and could not suppress her desire for alcohol.

Considering Konoha's true age, drinking a bit on occasion should not really be a problem. On the other hand, why was her alcohol tolerance so poor? Furthermore, after getting drunk, she would act in ways that seemed to flaunt her voluptuous figure...!

In addition, there was another person that Haruaki needed to pay close attention to apart from Konoha.

"Huff... I also feel... quite hot too... But... I'm not gonna... act like Cow Tits. No, no matter what. So... I'm cold. Ohoh, so cold so cold... Hmm~"

Saying that, Fear began to cling tightly to Haruaki who was sitting in a chair next to her. Not only did she use her arms, but for some reason, she also wrapped her legs around Haruaki's waist.

"Huha, so warm~ Haruaki, your body is... so warm..."

"H-Hey..."

"Aren't you cold? If you're cold... Say so. Yes, then I'll... help you... help you like this..."

Fear took off her gloves and stuck her hands under Haruaki's clothing. Aiming accurately above his belt, she broke through all the defenses of Haruaki's clothes and went straight for his stomach.

"H-Hold on, it's very ticklish...!"

"Mmfu? Mmfufu... You don't like... this? Hey Haruaki... You like this, right?"

Fear's hand continued to move. The sensation of her small hands caressed his skin, around the navel and the flank. Then the small hands gradually moved up and scratched his chest area with her fingernails.

(D-Damn it, this girl... To think she'd get drunk this easily...!)

Unlike Konoha, Fear had not drunk any spiced sake. All she imbibed were a few cups of amazake only. Who could have thought that she would end up in this state?

"That's~ so~ unfair~ —I want it too... Haruaki-kun's warmth..."

For some reason, Konoha never acted in opposition to Fear in these kinds of situations. While Fear was climbing the left side of Haruaki's body from the front, in contrast, Konoha was embracing him tightly behind from the right. Those excessively soft and massive objects, carrying a sensation that could not be ignored, were pressing against the top of Haruaki's neck. For some reason, Konoha was also panting, and just like Fear, she was trying to reach her hand into his collar—

"Ohoh~ Drats, I'm too late because I was too busy taking pictures... Maybe I should hurry and get drunk now to join in with you guys!"

"K-Kuroe-kun, what are you talking about!? Absolutely ridiculous, how absolutely ridiculous! Hey, you two, behave yourselves! U-Umm, as the class representative, I absolutely cannot stand aside and condone this! Get away from Yachi right now!"

Perhaps bringing assistance from heaven, Kirika, who had been watching the two girls' embarrassing behavior in wide-eyed shock all this time, suddenly regained her senses and walked over to them. Despite her blushing cheeks, she still intended to pull Konoha and Fear away by force—

"Oh dear, Ueno-san... Would you like to drink together? Rather, you must drink, right? After drinking, your mood will be much more uplifted..."

"Oh~ Kirika~ You look quite cold too. Let me warm you up, warm you up~"

"Kyah! Wait... Konoha-kun, Fear-kun, hurry and wake up now...!"

However, reality was harsh and Kirika's words failed to reach their ears. The two girls quickly switched targets from Haruaki to her, almost hanging themselves over her while they began to touch and explore her body. Haruaki took this opportunity to straighten his clothing. Feeling it would be inappropriate to watch, he also turned his gaze away from the scene.

"Mmm... H-Hey! Not... there..."

"Your body really is quite cold. That's no good, since you're a girl after all. So... Come, Ueno-san, have a drink as well... Here."

"That's right, have a cup of this. Here!"

"Ngh! Mmm... Mmm..."

Just as Haruaki finally turned his gaze back towards them, he found Fear and Konoha forcing their paper cups to Kirika's lips. Staring wide-eyed, Kirika gulped as though she was unable to resist any longer. The spiced sake and amazake cocktail was slowly absorbed into her body.

Then with a thud, Kirika collapsed and sat on the floor with her head bowed down. Oh no! Just as Haruaki tried to get up from his chair, Kuroe ran over from somewhere.

"This is the friendly Kuroe-chan delivery express. Anyone need a refill~? Currently, the only options in stock are one cup of amazake and two cups of spiced sake~"

"Of course, please give me the spiced sake."

"Oh~ Gimme the amazake~"

"How odd... My throat feels like it's burning up... Ah, so thirsty. Anything will do, give it to me now."

"Class Rep!"

"Come come come." Kuroe took the three paper cups in her bosom and handed them to the three girls. Yes, three girls.

After a while, having received the spiced sake from Kuroe, Kirika slowly looked up. Her cheeks were fiery red while she stared blankly with glazed eyes. Then—finally, even Kirika raised the paper cup and downed the liquid in one gulp. For Haruaki, this scene of reality was a total nightmare. Next, Kirika stood up unsteadily.

"How should I put this...? Indeed. I have many things to say to you. You're always so indecisive and excessively kind. You never voice your dislikes even when you're facing them. And whenever you encounter unlucky things—"

"Ohoh, so cold so cold. I'd better return to Haruaki's warm embrace~"

"Come come, let me warm you up. Ufufu, Haruaki-kun, ufufu...?"

The three girls approached Haruaki step by step. As though saying "another shutter moment has arrived!", Kuroe simply held up the camera in her hands. No one stepped up to assist him. No one at all...



"W-Wait a sec, could you all calm down!?"

"I am very calm, how absolutely ridiculous—hic! Listen carefully. The first thing I want to ask you is this. Although you keep enjoying distractions, ultimately, you prefer slender figures? Or more voluptuous ones? Or something in between would be best, exciting you with a feeling that things are just right? Something like that—Hey, roving eyes are not allowed!"

"That's right, no roving eyes~"

"Haruaki-kun, please watch very carefully... Starting now, I shall... warm you up... very well... Haruaki-kun..."

For some unknown reason, Kirika's face was filled with anger while Fear and Konoha were making seductive expressions. Although Haruaki tried to stand up and flee, the three girls surrounded completely him with ghost-like footsteps. Ah, these must be vengeful ghosts. No mistake about it, these girls were currently vengeful ghosts.

Amidst despair, Haruaki could not help but think. Could it be that his o-mikuji fortune earlier did not mean "having the devil's own luck"—Rather, it actually implied "despite your great fortune, you will encounter demons and disasters."

Roughly an hour later—

"Hmm~ What have I been doing up until now...? My brain feels like it's in a daze. I can't recall at all."

"Let me tell you, there are things in this world that are better left forgotten..."

Far away from the noise and bustle of the New Year's first shrine visit, Haruaki's group had gone to a field outside the shrine's confines. This was a spot in the forest that appeared to be a walking trail without anyone around. Haruaki had chosen it, thinking that a peaceful and quiet environment along with the chilly wind of the night would be just right for the girls to wake up from their drunken stupor.

Some more time passed after that. Perhaps unable to bear the sight of Fear and the others embarrassing themselves any further, Kuroe decided to stop providing them with alcohol. While Haruaki endured during this time, Fear and the girls gradually regained their sanity. Hence, they decided to take a stroll to walk off the drunkenness.

"Hmm... I was going to suggest treating it as celebrating the New Year, but perhaps I might have gotten a bit carried away? I'm currently reflecting~"

"That's right. Seriously."

Haruaki threw a glance from the side, causing one of the main culprits, Konoha, to shrink her shoulders in embarrassment:

"Umm... I'm currently reflecting too. Oooh, I clearly thought that if it were just a single cup, it would probably be okay... At any rate, it feels like something quite outrageous happened, so let's just forget it! Yes, forget it!"

"Seriously... Seriously... Such an embarrassment... Absolutely ridiculous..."

Kirika was covering her face in her hands and shaking her head left and right as though expressing regret from the bottom of her heart.

"However, those girls are the ones who forced you to drink after all... Say, Class Rep, you don't have drinking experience? Oh right, we're all underage, so having no drinking experience is the norm."

"Th-That goes without saying! This is society's rule so I've never drunk alcohol before! Furthermore, it's because «Gimestorante's Love» does not cure internal abnormalities very well... Arghh, that said..."

Kirika sighed in depression, at a loss for words. Yes, Kirika could very well be considered one of the victims.

In any case, Fear must be forbidden from drinking beverages such as amazake from now on. Haruaki committed this firmly to memory and continued strolling leisurely.

"But anyway, this place is so quiet. What a great place suited for a leisurely walk. There are no other people too."

"After all, it's still the early hours of New Year's Day. Putting the New Year's first shrine visit aside, nobody normally goes wandering in the backwoods of the shrine in the first place... Were it not for our entourage of drunken minors, making a completely embarrassing display of themselves, we wouldn't have to escape to a desolate area either."

"M-Muu... I only drank the amazake because you guys said it's okay. It's not like I drank it deliberate to get drunk! So ultimately, it's all Cow Tits's fault! I'm not to blame at all!"

"Why do I feel unable to raise objections against you at this time...? Hoo~"

Only scattered moonlight streamed through the forest as the lightly blowing wind caused leaves and branches to rustle. Fear was right, it was really quiet. Since they had been immersed in excessive noise until earlier, taking an occasional quiet walk like this was not bad at all. While Haruaki was enjoying this serenity as they advanced slowly, before he knew it, he was trailing furthest back in the group together with Fear.

Haruaki glanced at the quivering silver hair beside him.

"By the way... How do you feel about this?"

"Hmm? About what?"

"Uh, I mean stuff like New Year's and the first shrine visit. These are all new to you, right? Basically, all the required customs are finished, so I wanted to know your impressions."

"Umuu, it feels like a festival, so I'm very happy! By the way, the New Year's first shrine visit is basically a festival!"

Instantly, Fear spoke with rapture. "That's wonderful." Haruaki smiled wryly. Even though this was business as usual for the rest of them and nothing original, it was different for Fear. She was coming into contact with all this for the first time. Every time she recounted her impressions of first experiences with a smile, Haruaki felt an incredible sense of freshness. As much as he always took everything for granted, they were actually quite wonderful things—It felt like he was experiencing the value of these activities anew.

"But putting the New Year's first shrine visit aside, I don't feel like I've experienced New Year activities fully yet. The so-called New Year's first shrine visit is just a part of New Year activities, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Apart from the first shrine visit, what else do people do for New Year's? Speaking of New Year, there should be other activities, right?"

"Hmm~ What else huh... But I think you've already experienced many activities... Such as New Year's calligraphy or making mochi rice cakes, you already played with those earlier. Karuta card games... That was sort of covered at home, plus the Lucky Laugh. You also saw the top spinning and stilts walking."

"Ohoh!" Fear's eyes glimmered as she recalled the various sights.

"So you mean those things that people were playing with back at the plaza! How should I put say this? They look like games that need quite a bit of skill... I've heard that children in the past used to play these games, are all Japanese like this? Everyone has to undergo circus training? Making tops spin so fast nonstop just by pulling a string and walking on those tall and unsteady stilts... It's truly unbelievable!"

Fear was happily gesturing with her arms and legs while she spoke, most likely recalling the sights she saw at the New Year games zone earlier. When talking about spinning, she also spun her body as well to imitate the top's speed. Instantly, her silver hair was spread out like an umbrella and kept spinning.

"Haha, I think that tops can be spun easily after a little getting used to. Uh, but for you, I guess walking on stilts would be a little problematic..."

"W-What are you talking about!? Who are you calling heavy? I'll curse you!"

"I didn't say anything yet! But true, I was going to point out this critical matter! No wait, let's get back to the topic, about other typical New Year activities huh... Right, there's the New Year's g—"

Ah!

Haruaki frantically shut his mouth. In his attempt to change the subject from Fear's weight, he seemed to have inadvertently touched on an even more dangerous topic.

"New Year's g—What?"

"N-Nothing. Uh~ What else is there~? Other activities huh~ Hahahaha."

Haruaki laughed drily and averted his gaze but Fear glared intently at him sideways. What a crisis. Were it on the level of a Christmas present, it would not have mattered, but in consideration of living expenses, there was no way for Haruaki to shoulder the burden of New Year's gifts and he hoped that the girls could understand that. Furthermore, New Year's gifts were normally given to children by married adults. But were Fear to learn of the existence of New Year's gifts—"What!? The New Year's gift is like extra pocket money suddenly popping out of nowhere? Then to me, it's like rice crackers suddenly popping out of nowhere!" Surely she would

approach with a greatly alarmed expression on her face. Haruaki decided he must gloss over the issue somehow, but—

"Muumuu... Shameless brat, you're hiding something from me! Spill the beans now! Hurry and tell me now!"

"Th-There's nothing at all. It's your imagination! Only your imagination!"

"What imagination? My eyes cannot be deceived by you! There must be some secret New Year's activity that's really awesome. What is it? Spit it out! Is it something like a ritual to pray for a year's of good health and wolf down a mountain of rice crackers!?"

Perhaps because Haruaki was too poor of a liar, Fear grabbed and pulled his scarf hard, strangling his neck. To think she would use the present she gave as a murder weapon.

"Woah! H-Hold it, let's talk this out!"

"You're one to speak! What's with hiding things from me on the very first day of the new year!? Unacceptable, no way! In that case, it means you'll surely spend the entire year doing things you dare not tell me! Like not telling me about how you flipped some girl's skirt on the way to school in the morning, not telling me about how you pretended to accidentally bump into someone in the hallway and groped her boobs during midday, not telling me you're peeping on us in the bath at night—T-Truly and utterly shameless secrets!"

"Why do all your examples of my secrets make me out to be some kind of sex offender!?"

This conversation ended the peace and quiet in the forest, bringing forth the usual noise and argument. Ultimately, one could say that Fear and noise were inseparable. The notion of having a leisurely stroll while enjoying peace and quiet was probably too naive from the very start.

However, Haruaki thought, there was nothing wrong with this. This was not bad either. This noise, taking place as usual matter-of-factly, was definitely not a bad thing—Except for the scarf strangling his neck, which was best omitted.

Walking in front, Kirika and Kuroe turned their heads back to reveal wry smiles as though saying "you guys are hopeless." Only Konoha was pouting with displeasure in response to the attempted homicide happening

behind her. As expected, she was the most reliable. Okay, hurry and apprehend the culprit but please be gentle or else the two of you will start another argument—Just as Haruaki was thinking this...

Thud! A certain sound rang out in the forest.

"Hmm?"

Fear tilted her head as she looked towards the sound's direction. The sound was heard again. The source was quite near, off to the side of this walking trail. Apparently, Fear had turned her attention away from Haruaki and towards the mysterious noise in the desolate forest. Simply letting go of Haruaki's scarf, she straightened her back and stood on tiptoe, trying to see into the depths of the forest.

"What's that noise?"

"No idea... But doesn't sound natural at all! Oh, there it is again."

While Kuroe was whispering softly, the sound was repeated intermittently, resembling impacts between wood and some other object. The members of the group looked at one another in puzzlement.

"Will anyone else come to this kind of place?"

"Cough cough... Well~ Since we're here after all, you can't assert that it's absolutely impossible. So, should we go take a look? If some elderly mister got drunk on spiced sake and came here for the cool breeze like us but ended up collapsing on the ground and is now smacking wood to call for help—If that's the case, it'd be terrible."

Partially to change the subject, Haruaki massaged his severely injured throat while trying to make a suggestion. As much as he wanted to grumble at Fear, were she to retort: "it's all because you're hiding something from me!" and revisit the earlier topic, it would be a bit too much for him to swallow.

"Hmm, that does sound possible. Since this is a good chance for me to help someone for the first time in the new year, let's go over to have a look."

Fear had apparently forgotten the subject of the mysterious New Year's activity. Thank goodness.

Hence, with Fear in the lead, the group left the sloppily weeded walking trail and entered the forest. The noise continued and became clearer and clearer. Thud. Thud. Thud—Apart from that, human voices could also be heard. Sure enough, someone was there?

After a while, Haruaki's group discovered figures in the dark forest. The separation between the trees was roughly a couple meters. Standing in a row, in front of one of these trees—

"Eh...?"

Too many incomprehensible things. Who was over there? Why would the other party do this?

However, only one fact could be understood—the true identity of the noise they had been hearing all this time.

The answer was instantly clear the moment they witnessed the sight.

Unmistakably—

The sounds of a witching hour imprecation.

Part 6

A typical yet traditional method of cursing someone.

Because it was too typical, and too out of fashion as well, Haruaki could not help but doubt his eyes. But there was no mistake.

"Die! Be cursed! Die! Die—!"

Over there were two humans, both girls. One girl was yelling horrific dialogue with a deep, hoarse voice while holding long nails and a hammer in her hand. Her other hand was holding an object against a tree trunk while nails were being hammered into it—naturally, a straw effigy.

The girl, who had been hammering nails all along, exhaled and straightened her back. Then she said to the other girl:

"Might as well curse the second person as well. Isuzu, stick your head forward."

"Awww, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... Umm, it really hurts when you're pulling it out~..."

"If you refuse, I'll make you suffer even more pain. Or would you rather pull out your fingernail for me to use?"

"...I choose the head~"

The other person—a girl called Isuzu—leaned forward lightly while maintaining her smiling demeanor. The girl with the hammer reached towards her head and violently pulled off a strand of her long hair. "Oww." Still smiling, Isuzu held her head as though in great pain but without even throwing her a glance, the other girl stuffed the hair into a new straw effigy she had taken out from her shoulder bag. The straw effigy that was being nailed earlier was now akin to a bed of nails without any room for more. After securing the new straw effigy on the side, the girl took out a sheet of paper from her shoulder bag, looked at it for a few seconds and—

"The target's name... How do I read this? Yotsubaki...? Yotsubaki Takeharu! Die! Be cursed! Go rot! Die, die, die die die!"

The girl began to hammer nails repeatedly again. The other girl continued to smile while watching this scene unfold.

Haruaki shuddered. What was this about? What was going on?

"Die, die! Drown in a sea of your own yellow vomit! You'd best be raped by smelly homosexuals! Be cursed, be cursed, be cursed no matter what! Come, come, come... Hmm?"

"Oh dear."

At this moment, the girl who was cursing the straw effigy viciously while hammering nails, as well as the girl watching beside her, finally noticed Haruaki's group. The girl stopped hammering while the other girl continued to smile quietly as they both turned to look at the new arrivals. Rather than showing signs of fleeing or surprise, they simply stared.

Haruaki was doubting his eyes not only because of the act in progress but also due to his disbelief to see people like them engaging in such an act. A witching hour imprecation was a spell for cursing others. This type of cursing spell was absolutely irreconcilable with the girls' existences. Rather, it was diametrically opposed to their position. But why—

Why were these girls, dressed as shrine maidens, performing such an act?

"Hmph... So you guys must be the 'interlopers' huh?"

The girl with the hammer sneered and nodded in understanding for some reason.

Despite wearing a shrine maiden's outfit, she did not quite resemble a shrine maiden. Although there was a pair of thin-rimmed glasses on her domineering face, the girl did not give off any airs of a bookworm. Her shoulder-length hair was dyed an ostentatious color. With just a t-shirt on her upper body, the only part of her attire resembling a shrine maiden's was the red hakama. Perhaps due to the exertion of hammering the nails, her sleeves were rolled up to her shoulders in spite of the cold winter night, exposing a pair of arms with their pale complexion. A shoulder bag was hanging by a long strap that was buried in her cleavage, emphasizing the bulging of her well-proportioned bosom. Haruaki found himself a little unable to look straight at the girl.

Furthermore, apart from her upper torso, her lower body was equally inappropriate to stare at. The slits on the sides of her red hakama were even more wide open than those of a usual hakama. But because the girl was wearing a t-shirt instead of a white robe with a long hem as her top—Naturally, the high slits of her red hakama were offering tantalizing glimpses of her snow-white thighs all the way up to her hip area.



"Hah, the great pervert is staring at my thighs. How disgusting. Do you have a shrine maiden fetish? By the way, I'm not wearing panties. Does that make you even more aroused? Hmm, what a pervert. It's best that you get cursed. Best that you die. I'll need to jot this down: 'Today I encountered a pervert for the first time in a long while'..."

The girl returned her hammer to her bag and took out a cellphone instead, then she began to operate the buttons with one hand. Haruaki thought she was just mocking him, but was she actually recording the event for real?

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Chihaya-sama, wouldn't things be fine if you wore a normal outfit in the first place?"

"Then it makes things pointless. However, there may also exist perverts who are more aroused by the basic shrine maiden outfit. Then I'll leave those perverts to you. Puff out your chest and receive a visual rape in my place, Isuzu."

"Please allow me to remark in fear and trepidation, that's such an awful thing to say~"

Despite calling it awful, the girl named Isuzu continued to maintain her serene smile. She was a girl who gave off an impression like a senior, older sister, and she was wearing a standard shrine maiden outfit indeed. Her long, black hair curved mildly inwards at the tips and inexplicably gave off an air of purity that was very much consistent with a shrine maiden's essence. Compared to the deep, hoarse voice of the girl named Chihaya, Isuzu's manner of speaking was as clear and pleasant as the sound of silver bells.

"It's nothing unusual for the shameless brat to be violating girls with his eyes. I'll just have to teach him a lesson later. So, what are you two doing?"

Fear asked stiffly. As though looking down at them, Chihaya laughed while continuing to operate her cellphone.

"You still don't know after seeing it? Oh, so you don't get it because you're a foreigner? This is called a witching hour imprecation. I'm currently cursing someone."

"You said... curse...!"

Fear bit her lower lip hard. This was only natural, Haruaki thought. To these girls, who came into self-awareness as a result of curses—These words carried special significance.

"My advice is you'd better stop what you're doing."

"I agree with Ueno-san. Curses are ominous things that only serve to cause misfortune to befall others."

"Especially since you're using straw effigies... From my standpoint, I have no choice but to stop you~"

"Thank you for your advice but I won't stop. I already expected you people to say something like this, being interlopers after all, but I am not obliged to listen at all."

"Y-You idiot! You have absolutely no idea what will happen, Shameless Shrine Maiden! Hey Cow Tits, hurry up and give her a lecture! With boobs that has yet to match yours in ugliness, together with glasses like you... If this continues, you won't have any personal characteristics to distinguish yourself anymore! But actually, I don't really care!"

"Why are boobs and glasses my only personal characteristics!? Whatever, let's disregard this child's words for now, but cursing others really isn't a good thing. Although I've no idea what extenuating circumstances might cause you to do this, could you please stop in any case?"

"I refuse. This is my freedom. By the way, I don't actually have any extenuating circumstances... I'm just doing this because of work."

"Work...?"

Konoha frowned. Chihaya nodded lightly.

"That's right, I'm a curse expert. I only accept requests from customers who harbor resentment in their heart, then I simply perform curses on their behalf. Even if I curse people to die, I don't know them at all apart from their names... So there's no guilty conscience at all. Besides, it earns money so there are no downsides to me at all."

"That sounds even more despicable...!"

Haruaki groaned. Although he did not believe that witching hour imprecations had any actual effect, they were definitely nothing good either. Even though she was performing them on behalf of others, human

malice did exist in the process. When negative thoughts and feelings such as human malice are continually released intensely over a long duration—A "curse" could very well be planted for real: upon the straw effigies nailed to the trees as well as the nails and hammer in her hand.

Fear and the girls seemed to be thinking the same thing as their expressions became even more grim.

"A curse expert? All I can say is that it's truly an absolutely ridiculous line of work..."

"Indeed. Are you actually unaware that this has already strayed from humane behavior? And to wear a shrine maiden outfit intentionally as well... Although I have no idea what your relationship is, the lady over there, if you have her best interests in mind, you really should try to stop her."

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, that's because this is something that Chihaya-sama already decided~"

The shrine maiden named Isuzu shook her head while answering calmly.

"Hmph, this girl isn't going to oppose me. She's my flunkie. My slave. Should she dare complain, I'll beat her up in the next instant... Say, how much longer are you going to continue this 'none of my business' attitude while keeping your distance from me? These guys are almost about to make a move so hurry up and get ready, you idiot!"

"Owww, it hurts, Chihaya-sama..."

"Hurting you is the point!"

Chihaya pinched Isuzu's cheek and pulled hard to make her move, shifting Isuzu's position to in front of her, using her as a shield against Haruaki's group.

Konoha frowned at this action but a few seconds later, signs of suspicion surfaced on her face. However, Fear did not notice and simply exploding with impatience.

"Hey, stop it right there! This is going too far!"

"I already said she's my flunkie, so it's got nothing to do with you people, right? If you have no other business, please take your leave. Our work is done already. If you guys are here for the New Year's first shrine visit, stop

wasting your time in this kind of place. There's nothing interesting about this musty old shrine, but at least they serve spiced sake and amazake."

"We've already done the New Year's first visit and drank the amazake! What we need to do now is stop your stupid cursing behavior! Give the straw effigies and nails to me! In any case, I must make you stop doing this!"

Fear strode her way aggressively towards the delinquent shrine maidens. Chihaya cracked a grin and gave Isuzu's back a shove in Fear's direction. Fear continued to advance without taking out her Rubik's cube. This was only natural. Since Fear was no ordinary person, even a prim and proper shrine maiden in her way would pose no hindrance. Haruaki expected Fear to subdue Chihaya effortlessly and take the cursing tools away from her hands—

Just as he thought that—

Smiling, Isuzu tilted her head in puzzlement towards Fear.

"...Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I am truly sorry~ Because these are Chihaya-sama's orders~"

Maintaining her serene smile, she raised one arm, clad in the sleeve of her white robe. Instantly, Konoha's face was filled with alarm.

"! I knew it... Be careful, Fear-san! That person is the same as us—!"

"Muu?"

Just as Fear frowned in puzzlement, Isuzu exclaimed in a singing voice:

"—Akin to strong winds from high mountains, capable of blowing away thick layers of clouds; akin to the winds of morning and evening, capable of blowing away the mist!"

Ring! Instantly, there was an almost imperceptible sound of bells ringing, at the same time—

"N-Nuwawawa!?"

Fear was instantly surrounded by a tempest. The violent wind's aftereffects caused Haruaki's scarf to flutter intensely as well. Reflexively, he closed his eyes. When he reopened them again, he saw—

"Oh dear... Color Isuzu truly surprised~ Isuzu expected to blow you flying, but who could have thought that you're heavier than you look~"

"W-Who are you calling heavy? I'll curse you! That aside, what did you... do just now!"

Fear had turned the Rubik's cube into a drill and stabbed it into the ground. She was probably not blown away thanks to grabbing onto the hastily transformed drill. However, even without the drill to secure herself, given Fear's weight, she probably would have been fine after spinning a few circles.

After listening to Fear, Konoha narrowed her eyes, entered a combat stance and answered:

"Although I don't know what she did, I can understand why she has the ability to do so. It started bothering me from a while ago, but after seeing her attack just now, the answer is obvious—This person is one of our kind."

"A cursed tool... with human form?"

Haruaki asked quietly and Konoha nodded. Fear withdrew her drill from the ground and continued to glare at Isuzu warily. Meanwhile, Isuzu remained relaxed and inclined her head again in puzzlement.

"Oh dear... Fellow comrades? This is Isuzu's first time to meet fellow comrades!"

"Hmph, based on the current situation, you're not a comrade, okay? Just one of our kind. What's your true form? What actually happened just now?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Isuzu is exactly what the name implies^[7], a 'cursed bell' you see~ What you heard just now is called the Great Purification Norito Prayer—"

"Hold it right there, Isuzu. Now is not the time for talking about this. Say another unnecessary word and I'm gonna pinch you!"

"Oh, I am truly sorry~"

Isuzu retreated with nimble steps and returned to the angrily pouting Chihaya's side. Once Isuzu returned, Chihaya gave her head a knock before gazing at Fear's group once more.

"Oh... So there exist other things similar to Isuzu huh? The glasses girl and the shorty over there too? Or is it every single one of you?"

"Yes I am, but these two aren't!"

"However, we are interested parties."

Kirika's brief response drew a shrug from Chihaya.

"Interested parties huh! Whatever, it doesn't really matter. I don't have any business with you guys either... If you won't leave, then it can't be helped. We'll leave instead."

"W-Wait! We're not finished talking yet! With that girl before your eyes as an example, why won't you understand that curses are inauspicious! Don't curse people anymore!"

Chihaya coldly sneered and ignored Fear. Just as she turned to leave, she suddenly stopped.

"..."

"Isuzu?"

Frowning, Chihaya looked at Isuzu whom she had expected to follow. However, Isuzu stood motionlessly in the same position—For some reason, she had her hands against her ears as though trying to listen to mountain echoes.

During this time, Haruaki's group heard an extremely quiet sound that seemed to be coming from far away—bell ringing.

"Oh dear. This... Oh no... Isuzu really must try harder now..."

"Hey, I don't know what you heard, but talk about it later! We must leave now because these guys look like they will do something troublesome! Hey Isuzu, are you listening?"

"...Yes~ That's right, Isuzu must try harder... So, in this regard, perhaps this situation could be considered perfect. Yes, this is the only way..."

Chihaya pulled the collar of Isuzu's white top but she remained immobile as a mountain. Smiling serenely, accompanied by a slightly hazy gaze, Isuzu slowly looked at Fear and her companions one after another.

"It looks like everyone's luck is quite good... How wonderful~ Two people with Middle Fortune, one with Great Fortune, and two with luck better than Great Fortune... Yes? I see now, well then—"

Hearing Isuzu's whispers, Haruaki was shocked. Although he had no idea why she was commenting on this... Everything she said was right on target. Those were the results of the o-mikuji fortunes they had drawn at the shrine. Did she possess the ability to sense o-mikuji results? But what use was there for such an ability? And what would be the point?

Hearing those low whispers, Fear also displayed puzzlement on her face but she seemed to immediately understand what she needed to do. Perhaps to intimidate the other side, she waved the drill in her hand dramatically.

"Although I don't get what you're talking about... Our conversation is not finished in any case! I won't let you go so easily!"

Then she approached them. Isuzu continued to murmur with her eyes glazed over.

"Wait... Fear, don't get too violent...!"

"If I let something as stupid as a curse expert continue to exist, that doesn't count as helping anybody! Don't worry, I'll be careful not to injure them—as much as possible!"

"...Tsk."

At this moment, Haruaki heard Chihaya clicking her tongue impatiently at the immobile Isuzu. Chihaya reached into her bag, took out something and swiftly tossed it forward. In the next instant—

A flash of light erupted.

"So bright!"

"Woah, what's this!?"

A total surprise attack, probably something resembling a flash grenade. The large amount of light attacked their eyes that had already grown accustomed to the darkness, instantly robbing them of their sight. Despite closing his eyes, Haruaki still felt a stinging sensation beneath his eyelids and could not see anything.

"Arghhh, damn, it turns out bringing this along was the right decision... But since it's hand-made, the effects don't last too long! Isuzu, behave yourself and listen to me now! Hey, wait up!"

Chihaya's anxious voice was heard. What was happening?

Haruaki desperately blinked, trying to recover his vision as quickly as possible. during this time, outlines of objects finally became clear. Next to enter his view was the quiet forest and the cold moonlight, same as before, as well as—

"Muguu!?"

"...Huh?"

Incomprehensible. Inexplicable. Haruaki could not help but exclaim stupidly.

Probably using the flash grenade as cover to get close, Isuzu had approached Fear, lifted her face with both hands...

...And stolen her lips.



"Mmm..."

Still with a serene expression, Isuzu was pressing her lips against Fear's mouth and exhaling lightly. Fear's face began to twitch slightly, shocked out of her senses while allowing Isuzu to do something between their lips. However—

"...! ...!! ...!!!"

Naturally, Fear could not continue to let Isuzu do as she pleased. Anger suddenly surged in her gaze as she vigorously pushed Isuzu aside. Without saying a word, Fear raised the drill in her hand, intending to attack but Isuzu leapt and distanced herself with her hakama fluttering, then—

"The Spirit, Ibukidonushi, who is the origin of the breath of life, will breathe and blow sins and impurities out to the ends of the underworld!"

Next, stronger wind began to blow, affecting an even greater area than earlier, throwing people off balance. Having just recovered her sense of balance from the earlier drunken haze, there was no way for Fear to resist this attack again. She plunged her drill into the ground to withstand the gust of wind but Haruaki and others could only roll helplessly along the ground. Only Konoha swiftly entered a defensive stance with both hands but this left her immobile as well.

"Ahh, jeez, what the heck are you doing!? Did you suddenly realize you're a lesbian? You idiot! Stop acting weird and you should've used this gust of wind from the beginning! Hurry and get going!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, sorry for making you wait~ Let's go~"

Then the two girls disappeared among the trees. Konoha hesitated, wondering if she should chase after them, but finally decided to help Haruaki and the rest who were rolling on the ground. Pulling Haruaki up by the arm, she asked at the same time:

"Are you okay, Haruaki-kun?"

"Y-Yeah. Luckily, the ground underfoot isn't concrete. By the way, who are they actually?"

"Looks like they don't belong to any particular organization. Probably just a Wathe and the owner... Although that description doesn't quite capture everything they've done."

"A curse expert huh... I really wish they could change their mind."

Kirika and Kuroe also stood up. Then what should they do next? Should they chase after the two girls to convince them not to work as curse experts anymore? Or should they give up and return home—

Just as Haruaki pondered these matters, Fear waved her drill while approaching rapidly.

"...!"

With her face filled with anger, she pointed in the direction where the two girls had vanished. Let's chase them! —Was probably what she intended to say.

"I don't really mind... But what do we do after we actually catch them? This is different from last time when we punished the boys who stole offering money from a shrine. Also, since the girl has a cursed tool assisting her, who knows if a threat of 'you'll get cursed!' would be effective or not..."

"...! ...!"

Fear frowned while opening and closing her mouth. At this moment, Haruaki suddenly realized that something was off.

"Hey Fear... You, umm..."

"—!"

What? Haruaki could see her mouthing such a word, but no sound came out. At last, Fear also noticed her unusual condition and reached with her hand to touch her own throat, desperately trying to speak. In spite of that, no sound came out. Fear's face suddenly changed dramatically with an alarm realization, moving her lips nonstop as she approached Haruaki, furiously trying to express something.

Rendered speechless, Haruaki simultaneously understood the inexplicable behavior Isuzu had done to Fear as well as Fear's current symptoms. He believed these had to be linked.

Then combining the two events, there was only one natural conclusion. Although the underlying logic was unknown, neither did they know the other side's motives—There was probably no doubt about this.

Isuzu had stolen Fear's voice.

Chapter 2 - When Will the Emptiness Be Filled? / "Before long, if they reach out to each other"

Part 1

Now was not the time to be deliberating whether to chase down Chihaya and Isuzu or not. What was stolen must be recovered—Given it was something so precious, demanding its return was absolutely imperative.

Haruaki's group decided to split up in search of Chihaya and Isuzu. For them to be dressed as shrine maidens and appearing in this kind of place on New Year's Day, they were highly likely to be affiliated with the shrine. In any case, having decided on a time to meet up again and to call one another if any new developments arose, they headed off on their separate ways. Since Haruaki had no combat ability and could not handle things even if a situation arose, he acted with Fear as a pair.

Alone with Fear, who had lost her voice, they returned to the shrine's territory.

"..."

Fear pulled Haruaki's sleeve. Haruaki followed her gaze to see the place where shrine maidens were selling talismans.

"True, might as well check it out just in case."

Fear nodded. But once they approached the vendor area to have a look inside, there were no signs of the delinquent shrine maidens, obviously. Even when Haruaki asked some of the part-timer shrine maidens, they only looked at one another helplessly and answered: "Are there girls matching those descriptions...?"

After thanking them, Haruaki and Fear turned and left. Grand festivities were scheduled for dawn on New Year's Day. Although there was still some time before sunrise, the surroundings were quite noisy. Even so, Haruaki still found things too quiet and felt a little lonely.

(Clearly it's just because this girl isn't talking...)

Was he feeling this because up until earlier, she was more noisy than usual, such as during the New Year's calligraphy and mochi rice cake making activities?

Suddenly, Haruaki recalled the scene while they were strolling in the forest. The quiet forest. But Fear instantly made the scene liven up beyond compare. He had taken hustle and bustle for granted as part of Fear's natural presence.

Clearly it was so natural...

He had once thought that "there was nothing wrong" with such hustle and bustle...

He felt that such hustle and bustle was only natural...

Yet now it was missing.

Appearing behind him was a extremely desolate emptiness. He could not settle his thoughts. Something was missing. It filled him with unease.

"...Eh, Fear?"

Perhaps due to being immersed in his thoughts, when Haruaki suddenly turned his head to look back, he was surprised to find Fear missing without any signs of her. He frantically traced his steps to seek the silver hair amidst the crowd. Luckily, he quickly found Fear who was looking this way and that in worry.

"Ohoh, thank goodness. You're here."

"...!"

The corners of Fear's lips moved down as she charged straight at him. Without slowing down, she attacked Haruaki's stomach with the crash of a headbutt.

"Woah! Hey, you almost knocked my stomach out! After using it on the superintendent last time, is this move growing on you now!?"

"..."

Fear opened her mouth wide and said something silently. Probably some kind of scolding, but Haruaki could not hear anything.

Soon after, Fear realized with surprise and hung her head with an incomparably helpless and dejected expression while she tightly gripped Haruaki's coat above where she had just attacked him with the headbutt.

One could hardly blame her. Haruaki had forgotten.

Unable to settle down, feeling unease, he was not the only one. The victim herself, who had lost something precious to her, would naturally experience these emotions as well, probably to a further extent than him. The pain of not being able to say what she wanted. The pain of losing something she had always taken for granted. She was currently suffering.

None of her words could be transmitted instantly.

Whether the joy, sadness, loneliness or pain she was suffering.

All these were very distant. Because they were distant, they were impossible to transmit. Because they were impossible to transmit, a sense of distance was produced. Feelings of emptiness, solitude and isolation were created. But if even these feelings could not be instantly transmitted to a certain someone she wanted to share them with—

(That's... right... I must help her.)

Since she felt distant... Since feeling distant was making Fear suffer—

Then he had to approach her on his own initiative.

"Hmm... Okay, Fear, lend me your hand."

"...?"

Haruaki caught her little hand and led her towards his palm. Although it felt a bit embarrassing, there was no other way.

"So—Come, try writing with your finger. This will allow me to know what you want to say. But please spare me the complicated kanji."

Finally, Fear understood what he wanted her to do. Still bowing her head with a sense of loneliness, she used her index finger to slowly write on Haruaki's palm.

Character by character, she wrote using simple hiragana.

Haruaki deciphered the sentence as: 'Don't leave me behind'—

"...Yeah, I'm really sorry."

Haruaki apologized honestly. Perhaps relieved that she could transmit her words, Fear's tense face relaxed slightly. Haruaki looked back at her and said in jest:

"I'll be more careful from now on, so please forgive me... Would that be agreeable, my lady?"

Fear's finger moved slowly over his palm.

'Very well.'

"Thank you for your boundless generosity."

After Haruaki said this with a wry smile, Fear's expression became a lot more gentle.

So—Haruaki pondered to himself. Although it was going to be embarrassing as well, now that things had developed to this point and he had promised not to leave Fear behind by herself—This was surely the most effective solution.

"Since it'll be troubling if I received another of your headbutts because I didn't keep my promise... This is for the sake of my abs' protection. Hence, it can't be helped either."

Fear's index finger was still on top of Haruaki's palm.

Hence, very easily, Haruaki held Fear's little hand. Then holding her hand, he began to walk.

Fear showed surprise on her face for only an instant before switching to a pout and using her free hand to hammer Haruaki's shoulder. She was probably protesting: "Don't treat me like a child, I'll curse you!" However, Fear did not persist in her attack. Neither did she shake off his hand. Sensing her body warmth transmit through her hand, Haruaki instantly felt as though the sense of emptiness had shrunk slightly.

However, this definitely could not be allowed to persist. Absolutely not—

Haruaki looked around in the shrine's confines and resumed his search for Chihaya and Isuzu. Originally stuck with only the option of tugging Haruaki's clothing timidly, Fear was now starting to write on his palm whenever she had any questions to express her thoughts.

'Is that her?'

"What, over there!? Oh, it's just someone with black hair as well. Not Isuzu."

'What a shame.'

"I know right... Okay, let's check out that place over there this time."

Making rounds everywhere, they still could not find any signs of Isuzu or Chihaya. To be honest, Haruaki was starting to feel exhausted.

At this moment, Fear suddenly gripped his hand tightly while pulling on his sleeve with her other hand.

Forced to confront this silence, Haruaki looked into Fear's eyes. She seemed to be communicating something with her eyes as though insisting there was no need to write on his palm. Even without words, her thoughts were coming through vaguely. This was perhaps quite invaluable.

"Yeah... Let's take a break."

Fear smiled faintly, proving Haruaki's hunch correct.

After buying nostalgic marble soda^[8] at a nearby stall, they headed to the resting zone which had been occupied by noisy drunks earlier, finally finding seats for two with some difficulty. Fear tilted her head back and gulped down the soda. Viewed from the side, she was displaying far less of her usual domineering airs.

Haruaki did not intend to let this situation continue for long. Although Isuzu's motives in stealing Fear's voice were unknown, this behavior was absolutely unacceptable and action must be taken. Whether convincing her verbally or otherwise, Fear's voice must be returned to settle the matter. That said—Something needed to be done to relieve the current boredom.

(Letting her write words with her finger is not a bad solution... But is there a better way to communicate to each other more easily...?)

Haruaki wondered in distraction as he finished drinking his soda. How much time had passed since they started searching? Only when he took out his cellphone to check the time did he suddenly realize. This method also existed.

"By the way, Fear, although we're in the middle of this situation, let's have our first lecture of the new year on basic everyday knowledge."

"...?"

Fear tilted her head in puzzlement and reached out with her index finger, tickling Haruaki's palm as she wrote: 'Now is not the time for this kind of

thing.' Haruaki smiled wryly. This could very well be the last time for him to experience this sensation from her finger... This thought prompted an unbelievable reluctance to part with the feeling. This was because he had come up with a better solution for communication.



Haruaki waved his cellphone lightly.

"This lecture will teach you how to type on a cellphone. Email and texting are basically the same... If you memorize it all, I don't mind lending my cellphone to you, at least for all of today."

".....!"

Fear pondered for a moment then smiled radiantly. Then her finger moved to write:

'That's wonderful! Not a bad idea but it'll be really time consuming and bothersome=𐄂☹☂÷♪ζ√☠ ! '

"You're writing too fast towards the end so I can't figure it out at all! Calm down, I'll teach you slowly."

Fear shook her silver hair and looked at the cellphone as though saying: "Then hurry up and start!"

It was very quiet for quite a long while.

At a distance close enough to feel each other's breathing, above the cellphone, their faces were pressed tightly together.

Under this silence, Haruaki taught Fear how to type, character by character.

The emptiness created by panicking unease seemed to shrink substantially. Surely it would shrink even more once Fear memorized how to type. However—

It will definitely not vanish completely. So long as this continued, it absolutely will not.

(Isuzu and Chihaya, I will definitely find you...)

Haruaki steeled his determination once more and clenched his fist. During this time, he finished explaining how to enter text. He could feel Fear taking the cellphone in apprehension and beginning to tap the buttons using just her index finger.

Finally, Fear looked up with a grin and brought the cellphone close to Haruaki's face.

On it was written:

'By the way, delicious. If only eaten with crunchy food.'

"...No matter what, a shrine like this one isn't going to sell rice crackers. Is eating all your can think of on New Year's Day!?"

Haruaki knocked the silver-haired head lightly.

Fear pouted with displeasure and entered her usual catchphrase into the cellphone.

Part 2

As the words implied, the back of the shrine's mountain was literally her own backyard.

After escaping from the interlopers in the forest, Chihaya pushed her glasses while exhaling deeply. Having sprinted all the way, her body was red from heating up but her exposed thighs still felt rather cold. Of course, even so, she still could not possibly approve of this outfit. As usual, she was simply agitated and impatient.

"...Why did you do that?"

"By that, you mean~?"

"Of course the kiss. If you don't get what I'm saying, let me put it another way. In other words, kissing, smooching, exchanging saliva through lip to lip contact and entangling each other's tongues. Pick any description you want."

"Oh, you mean exchanging saliva through lip to lip contact and entangling each other's tongues just now~"

"Are you toying with me?"

"What~?"

Isuzu smiled and tilted her head while Chihaya clicked her tongue. Whatever, who cares what she wants to call it. "Continue explaining!" Chihaya urged using her gaze.

"Because it is a necessary act~ If it made you unhappy, let me apologize here~"

"Why is it necessary? Will your body heat up from arousal without end or something like that? ...Whatever, I've absolutely no interest in your sexual orientation. Anyway, I've decided. From now on, you'll stand outside the room whenever I'm changing. So—an oracle appeared before that. What did it say?"

"Well... Yes..."

Pressing a finger to her lip, Isuzu pondered for a while. Then tilting her head again, she said:

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, I hope you'll permit me to keep it a secret~"

"Are you kidding me?"

Chihaya pinched Isuzu's ear and twisted hard, completely mercilessly, because Isuzu was absolutely forbidden to hide anything from her. Isuzu was probably in enough pain to feel as though her ear were about to fall off, yet she maintained her smile. This further aggravated Chihaya who proceeded to grab her other ear.

"...You're still not telling?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, ouch... But I still can't tell you~ This is for your sake, Chihaya-sama, do please understand~"

What do you mean, for my sake? This girl is my tool. Errand girl, flunkie and slave all in one. Insubordination cannot be tolerated at all. Did I fail in her training? Or ear twisting alone is not enough? Maybe I should simply pinch those tips of her excessively large breasts as well?

Chihaya entertained the thought half-seriously but did not put it to action in the end. With one forceful twist, she released Isuzu's ears.

"Seriously... Whatever, it doesn't matter now. After all, we did lose those people for sure. It's not like they can intentionally search the entire mountain for us."

"...True, so long as that is the case!"

Isuzu nodded calmly as usual. Somehow, Chihaya felt as though her reply held further meaning but could not read Isuzu's true thoughts. However, Chihaya did not let herself be bothered and simply dismissed it matter-of-factly with "so be it, in any case."

After all, ever since meeting this girl, Chihaya had never been able to guess her true thoughts at all.

Part 3

After reaching the appointed meeting location, Haruaki and Fear converged with Konoha and the rest of their group inside the shrine's confines. Judging from the fact that nobody called the cellphone he had lent to Fear, Haruaki knew that no one's search succeeded.

'Did you search properly!?''

Typing these words on the screen with an impatient look, Fear thrust the phone in front of Konoha's face. Sighing as though saying "when did you learn how to enter text on a cellphone?", Konoha replied:

"I did search properly. I know that being unable to speak is very serious, but trying to vent your frustrations on me won't help... Ah, hey, hold on!"

As though saying "Did you search properly!? Did you!? You didn't!", Fear rubbed the cellphone hard in Konoha's face. Not satisfied with that, Fear even went as far as to shove the cellphone together with the "Did you search properly!?" message in between Konoha's cleavage.

"Kyah... Hey, stop it right now! U-Ueno-san and Kuroe-san, how did your searches go?"

"We came up emptyhanded as well. Unfortunately, the search area is too wide."

"Yeah, if only we had some sort of clue... Haru, did you try asking the shrine maidens who are selling the talismans?"

"I did, but none of them recognized the descriptions."

At this moment, Fear dropped her gaze and stared at the cellphone, typing something. The screen she then showed to everyone said:

'bcuz they r jst smallfry! shrine maidenz boss shld no!'

"What excessive typos, I've never seen anything like 'shld no' before. Say, do shrine maidens have a so-called boss...?"

While saying that, Haruaki suddenly realized. Although a so-called shrine maidens' boss probably did not exist, there was someone in charge of

managing the shrine maidens. They probably should try asking that person.

"Yeah, anyway, let's first try to find that person. But who knows where?"

Even if they conducted an undirected search all over the place, Haruaki did not think that would bear fruit. Hence, he tried his luck by asking one of the shrine maidens at the talisman vending area: "We have important matters to discuss." As it so happened, it was the shrine maiden's turn to have a break and she was willing to pass the message along. After a short wait—

The person who appeared was—naturally—this shrine's chief Shinto priest.

"I am Hayakawa, this shrine's chief priest... Are you the people who wanted to discuss something with me?"

The man was over fifty with a fair amount of white hair. His slender physique was clad in a white outfit. Haruaki gulped and inquired as politely as he could because this man might be completely unrelated to the two girls.

"Yes, we're really sorry to make you come out specifically for us. Uh, what I'd like to ask about is... Umm, is there a shrine maiden here called Chihaya with dyed hair? Also, is there someone else named Isuzu?"

Hearing these words, the Shinto priest instantly frowned. Then after glancing at his surroundings, he lowered his voice and said something exceedingly relevant.

"My daughter... Chihaya, has she caused you any trouble?"

Part 4

Leading Haruaki's group, the Shinto priest brought them to a Japanese residence somewhere behind the shrine office. Apparently, the priest's family lived there usually. After smelling the same tatami scent as in the Yachi residence, Haruaki could not help but feel more relaxed.

"Please have a bit of tea, I hope you don't mind its crudeness."

"Oh, we're the ones who are sorry for intruding... Thank you for your hospitality."

Haruaki drank the tea the priest brewed for them. As expected, this calmed his mood somewhat. At the same time, a sense of sleepiness suddenly arrived but now was not the time to sleep yet.

After drinking tea in silence for a while, sitting opposite to Haruaki's group, the priest spoke up:

"So... About Chihaya... did she really...?"

"Yes."

Haruaki gazed straight into the priest's eyes and answered. Before they were invited into this house, he had already explained.

"Chihaya has stolen something very precious from us... Yes, extremely precious."

The priest exhaled and slumped his shoulders with a pained expression. Seeing this, Haruaki was at a loss what to do. No, they were not trying to make this person bear responsibility. Neither did they have any desire to punish Chihaya for her mistakes.

"No, umm... Although it's stolen... We do want her to return it, but well... It definitely doesn't make your daughter a criminal. This incident is more like an unfortunate accident that resulted from many misunderstandings. I think once we get to discuss with her properly, she'll return it to us."

After hearing that, the priest looked up.

"May I ask what exactly she has stolen...?"

Haruaki instantly hesitated. It was not like he could push Fear forward and say "it's her voice," right? That said, he could not think of another excuse. Even if he made up something like saying Chihaya had stolen a wallet, it would only make this father even more depressed.

"Due to some extenuating circumstances, we're not in a position to disclose... But in any case, it is something extremely important."

"..."

"Umm, of course you may find this very suspicious! But—"

Just as Haruaki frantically tried to explain, the priest finally showed an exhausted smile.

"No, I'm not doubting you. I can tell that you've told me the truth... So, since you must be facing some kind of difficulty, I don't intent to force you to tell me."

"Y-Yes... Thank you."

"Then your daughter—her name is Chihaya, right? Do you know where she is right now? Just as mentioned earlier, we would like to meet her again and talk to her."

The priest shook his head at Konoha.

"I'm really sorry... When I was brewing the tea just now, I took the opportunity to check Chihaya's room but she's not here currently."

"Is that so? Then would you be so kind as to tell us her cellphone number?"

"I'm really ashamed to say, I don't actually know her cellphone number."

Hearing this, Haruaki's group looked at one another. A father not knowing his daughter's cellphone number, was this possible?

Perhaps noticing Haruaki's groups' doubts, the priest sipped hot tea with an even more exhausted expression.

"Sigh, I'm really ashamed. Since she already stole your belongings, trying to hide things wouldn't help. Chihaya is a daughter who causes me a headache in all sorts of ways... To be honest, our relationship can't be described as good. As much as I'd like to treat it as simply her rebellious phase—She's further distanced herself from me ever since my wife was hospitalized."

"Your wife is currently hospitalized? That really is... quite a predicament."

Kirika concurred with a calm expression. She probably thought that they should chat further even though Chihaya's current whereabouts were unknown. Haruaki agreed. This was a rare opportunity and he wanted to ask about certain things. Regarding Chihaya as well as Isuzu who accompanied her. Did the priest know about curses and that Isuzu was a cursed bell? Was he aware that his daughter was working as a curse expert?

"Sigh, I'm already quite used to it. She's been living in the hospital for many months now... Although there's no immediate threat to her life, it's a

type of illness that's hard to cure. Oh dear, how sorry I am, I've gone on a tangent. We're currently talking about Chihaya."

"Just now, you mentioned that she's causing you headaches in all sorts of ways... Is there some sort of problem? To be honest, it's our first time meeting her today. We are simply curious so it's okay to ignore us."

"No no, I don't mind. However, perhaps there's nothing special about her problems. Since you've all seen her, I'm sure you can understand. Currently, she's always foul-mouthed, dyeing her hair, and I've heard from school that she's occasionally absent... Also, she wanders outside in the dead of the night like today."

After listing examples, the only conclusion one would inevitably make was "what an ordinary, rebellious teenage girl." Haruaki secretly wondered, since the priest did not seem like he was lying, most likely he did not know about his daughter's work—as a "curse expert."

Someone tugged at Haruaki's pants beneath the table. Taking a look, he found Fear by his side, typing orders on the cellphone: "Hurry up and ask about that girl!" Naturally, they also needed to ask about the other person. Rather, this was actually the main point.

"Oh... About the other person named Isuzu, the shrine maiden accompanying Chihaya who looks older, who is she?"

"Ah, Isuzu huh... Probably Chihaya's friend. Even after I asked Chihaya, she refused to tell me so I'm not too sure either. It started roughly a month ago, I'd see the two of them appear together occasionally at home or the shrine. She even greets me when we meet so I don't think she's a bad kid."

"Friend... huh? But she's dressed as a shrine maiden?"

Konoha tilted her head in puzzlement, to which the priest replied:

"Chihaya probably lent the outfit to her. The only thing we have in abundance at our home is a mountain of shrine maiden outfits. Because this shrine used to be quite prosperous in the past... But it has declined greatly now. Only through various means do we still manage to attract visitors and pilgrims."

"Such as innovating your own o-mikuji types?"

"Exactly."

Konoha smiled and gave off an aura saying "just because of that, I experienced an unnecessary sense of defeat." Luckily, the priest did not notice the dangerous aura she exuded.

In any case, the priest seemed to be completely ignorant of Isuzu's true identity. All Isuzu needed to do was return to her original form as a tool and others would think that she did not hang around Chihaya all day. Hence, it could not be helped that the priest's understanding of her was limited to just "a friend who frequently came to play."

"That said, what a sudden appearance. Mr. Priest, although this is completely unrelated to the conversation, did you buy any antiques a month earlier?"

Pretending to be an ordinary child with a blank expression until now, Kuroe suddenly posed such a question. The priest tilted his head, facing the extremely child-like Kuroe, still replied in a polite tone of voice:

"...? You're interested in antiques? Well... Chihaya is always busy in front of the computer, so I wouldn't be surprised if she ordered stuff over the internet. But I myself haven't come into contact with any. Oh right, although I think it'd be weird to list them as antiques, we did hold a joint ritual last month with another shrine that we generally keep in touch with... And the other shrine gave us all sorts of tools. However, most of them were already put away in the storeroom."

"Oh... In that case, there could very well be bells among them. Understood, Mr. Priest, thank you~"

"Y-You're welcome...?"

Kuroe bowed her head in thanks, causing the priest to bow his head in return according to etiquette. Next, he also bowed to Haruaki's group to express his apologies.

"Anyway... I don't know where Chihaya is right now. I'm truly sorry that I wasn't able to help everyone."

"No, please don't say that."

Haruaki bowed his head in return. At this moment, the priest spoke up as though remembering something:

"Umm... If you don't mind, would you like to have a look at Chihaya's room? After all, she's not here herself and it's possible that what she stole from you might be kept in the room."

Impossible. 100% impossible. But knowing more about Chihaya as a person might be helpful. For example, her relationship with Isuzu and why would Isuzu steal Fear's voice? Or how can they take it back? Although the situation was developing into deceiving the priest, giving Haruaki a guilty conscience, he still decided to accept the suggestion gratefully in any case.

"Then excuse our intrusion, we'll have a look... However, is it really okay? If she finds out that you casually allowed others to enter her room while she was absent, umm, wouldn't—"

"Don't worry." The priest said lightly and—

Smiled with incomparable loneliness. Then he continued:

"That child already seems to hate me with a passion. By this point, she can't possibly hate me any further."

While the priest was leading Haruaki's group to the room, his cellphone happened to ring. Apparently, one of the part-time shrine maidens was calling him to ask for assistance. "Excuse me, I need to give them directions while looking at some reference materials... Please don't hold back and feel free to look inside the room." Saying that, the priest returned to the living room without stepping into Chihaya's room.

Haruaki could not help but think: "Clearly it's his daughter's room. Is it really okay to leave a bunch of strangers like us unsupervised?" However, this meant that he really trusted them. Trying not to waste time, the group accepted the kind offer and decided to enter the room and investigate without the priest's company.

The interior space, six tatami in area, was extremely messy. Although it was probably a Japanese-style room originally, it was currently almost impossible to see its former appearance.

A futon was stuffed into a blob. Closet. Steel desk. A bookcase with many difficult looking books. A pile of devices of unknown purpose. A tangle of electrical cords ran all over the floor, easily tripping anyone if they were not careful. Instead of posters, the wall was occupied by stuff resembling

hanging power bars(?). Many cords extended from over there. Of the many devices in the room, the only type with known purpose was the computer. However, there were four computers with flashing power supplies, with the side covers dismantled, exposing the internal components. On the other hand, there were three monitors. Why would anyone need to use more screens than they had eyeballs? It was inconceivable for Haruaki who never used computers outside of class.

"Woah! How should I put this? This really has a mad scientist kind of feel..."

"It really resembles those junk shops in science fiction films. Like 'we sell infra-red prosthetic eyes!' or something like that~"

"The computers... Locked with passwords. That's expected, of course."

Kirika, the member of the group who seemed to have the broadest knowledge, operated the mouse but immediately shrugged and gave up. Looking around, Fear picked up a certain black mass of plastic from a wooden shelf, tilting her head in puzzlement. Kuroe's blank eyes gazed at it and said:

"Oh Ficchi! That could be a little dangerous. It's probably a stun gun."

"That's not just 'a little.' It's very dangerous!"

Speaking of stun guns, Haruaki recalled their suffering at the hands of Bivorio in the past. Fear probably remembered too. Frowning with disgust, she returned it to the shelf.

"Hmm, this shelf seems to be a self-defense item corner... Hmm, what's this tray?"

"...Those are probably materials for a flash grenade. As much as I'd like to forget, I've seen them before during my time in the Lab Chief's Nation. Over there are the finished products."

"Oh, that thing just now. I remember her saying it was handmade."

Kuroe nodded, half surprised, half impressed. Self-defense items plus handmade flash grenades... Why did Chihaya collect these things? Simply as a hobby? Or perhaps—Working as a curse expert meant that she often ran into situations where she needed to protect herself?

In any case, Chihaya's room did not offer any clues to her whereabouts. All they found out was that she seemed to like computers and technology. Returning to the living room, they found the priest looking up just as he finished his phone call:

"How did it go?"

"Uh, umm... We didn't find it."

"Really?" The priest nodded with deep regret as he cleaned up the documents scattered over the table. Honestly speaking, Haruaki's group did not have any further reason to stay, but if they were to say "We'll be on our way!" and leave, it would make them feel like robbers who had just ransacked someone's home. In any case, at the priest's urging, the group sat down on the seat cushions again. Then the priest said: "Umm... Since you're similar to Chihaya's age, I'd like to ask what are your opinions after seeing her room?"

So, what should they say? After secretly exchanging glances with Konoha and the others, Haruaki felt another tugging feeling at his pants. Glancing at the cellphone screen that was thrust beneath the table, he read the words: 'Something wrong with her brain.' Excuse me, Fear, I'm looking for a more tactful opinion.

Konoha ended up taking the responsibility of answering. Since she looked mature, composed and the calmest, she was best suited to the role of the communicator. In any case, Haruaki decided to leave things to her for now.

"Frankly speaking, her room cannot be considered normal. Even if she has an interest in computers, perhaps one could call it a little excessive."

Konoha spoke with a courteous smile, causing the priest to relax his expression with a wry smile.

"Well said... Because I don't understand technology, I'm not too sure myself. But I was thinking, if it's something that could be understood, I should try to understand it."

"Including your daughter?"

"...Of course."

After pausing for a few seconds, the priest spoke quietly as though to himself:

"I can't understand what that child is thinking, what she wants... But I don't think she is a bad child at heart. Uh, since she already stole something from you, perhaps this might not be appropriate to say to you..."

"I've already mentioned earlier, this incident is more like an unfortunate misunderstanding. We just want to have a good talk. She'll surely understand. Also, it's our first time meeting her today, so we don't know what her true character is like... We won't deny your assertion. Besides, there are also children who still help out at home despite straying on the wrong path."

"Haha, if everyone has already met her, you probably should understand, but as for the home... I guess the shrine's work probably counts, but she doesn't help out at all. I've never seen her dress up as a shrine maiden properly either. However—Ah, I remember now."

"You remember something?"

The priest looked up to glance at the clock in the living room. It was approaching 4am soon.

"Chihaya seems to be practicing dancing recently. At dawn, wearing a shrine maiden's outfit, together with her—the child called Isuzu. I've only ran into them by chance a few times and even when I asked her, she won't answer me, so I don't know the details. But from my perspective, I'm a little happy at the thought that Chihaya might be taking some interest in Shinto..."

Konoha turned to look at Haruaki. This information was quite unexpected. "Let's ask him more." Haruaki motioned with his eyes so Konoha spoke up next:

"She does it every day? Do you know where?"

"Probably every day. As for the location... When there's no one around, she'll be at the main shrine, but I've also seen her dancing in front of the shrine in the back of the mountain. Since there are many people at the main shrine today, I expect she'll be at the back of the mountain."

"Could you tell us the precise location? In other words, as long as we get there before sunrise, we should be able to see her?"

"I can't guarantee it, but the chances are quite high."

According to the priest, there was a large pond in the back of the mountain. The shrine was built in front of it. After memorizing the priest's directions, Haruaki exhaled. Finally, some progress was made in the matter.

"I understand now, thank you very much for the help. We have absolutely no intention of harming Chihaya-san. Neither do we plan on catching her to hand over to the police, so please don't worry."

"No, I'd like to thank you all instead... My unworthy daughter has caused you trouble. By the way, what are your plans during this time before dawn?"

"There are roughly three hours still. Haruaki-kun, what should we do?"

"Oh~ What should we do? This isn't enough time to make a trip home, but it's a bit too long to spend within the shrine's confines or at a convenience store... Hmm~"

Perhaps excited at the prospects of finally being able to catch Chihaya and Isuzu, Fear vigorously pressed the cellphone's buttons: 'Too laid back! Go there now! I'll wait!' However, Haruaki dismissed the suggestion. Staying outdoors for three hours straight, they could very well freeze.

Just as Haruaki was pondering—

"In that case, why don't you just stay here and have a nap? It's also fine if you want to do other things here. After all, I plan on taking a break from now until just before dawn."

A most welcome suggestion. However—

"I-Is this really okay...? Letting us, strangers who suddenly bothered you with a request, stay in your home..."

"You don't look like bad people. Besides, my daughter seems to have caused quite a lot of trouble for you all, so this serves as a kind of compensation. Although I don't have anything to serve you, please don't be formal and feel free to stay here and rest."

Although it felt like intruding too much on the priest's kind intentions, a fight could very well break out again once they encountered Chihaya and Isuzu. Furthermore, they had not slept all night since New Year's Eve. The temptation of a nap seemed both gratifying and attractive.

"Well then... I guess we'll respectfully take up your kind offer."

Haruaki nodded at Konoha and bowed towards the priest.

"S-Sorry to bother you, Chief Priest... Thank you for your hospitality."

"Pardon the intrusion~"

"Sorry for adding to your troubles."

Kuroe and Kirika proceeded to bow and express their thanks. Fear followed suit, her silver hair waving as she lowered her head. Haruaki secretly praised her: "This girl actually knows her manners." But upon further examination, he realized she was simply bowing her head to operate the cellphone. Appearing character by character on the screen was the message:

'By the way, does this house have snacks or rice crackers—'

Haruaki reached out from the side and silently held down the cellphone's delete key without letting go for a long time.

Part 5

Haruaki opened his eyes and woke up to someone's cellphone alarm clock. Wrapped in the blankets provided by the benevolent priest, the group had squeezed together and slept in the living room. At this moment, everyone began to get up from the tatami floor with a rustling sound. Naturally, it was not exactly comfortable but no one had any complaints. Besides, having heating was much better than staying outdoors for three hours.

"Hwa..."

"Good morning, Haruaki-kun."

"Oh, good morning. Although it was just a brief nap, I feel like I'm well rested. I'm really thankful to the priest."

"Yes. He mentioned that he would get up at roughly the same time as us. We really must thank him again."

"Mmm... Muuunnn..."

"Kiririn~? Ohoh, this is a getting up crisis. If you don't get up, I'm gonna take a photo of you still hugging the blanket with your butt in the air~! Then I'll add a caption along the lines of 'Title: Imitation of a Steamed Bun~'"

Perhaps prone to falling back to sleep in the mornings, Kirika continued to hug her blanket without moving. Kuroe raised her hand and patted Kirika on her bottom... Haruaki really wished she would pat Kirika's shoulder or back instead.

"By the way, the priest said we can also use the washroom. Then let's accept his kind offer and wash our faces. Besides, Ueno-san still hasn't gotten up yet."

"Sure." Just as Haruaki nodded in agreement, Fear, who had been lying on the tatami, suddenly got up with a grim expression.

"Good morning, Fear. I know you're all fired up to catch those girls, but go wash your face first—"

"...!"

"Woah! Why are you using your fists to turn my face as soon as you got out of bed!? Is there some kind of misunderstanding!?"

...Right—Fear seemed to be saying. Suddenly, with a serious expression, she took out the cellphone from her pocket and tapped away to enter a brief message on the screen:

'You shameless brat!'

"I'm not asking you to attack me with the cellphone! What did I do to you?"

Haruaki grabbed Fear's arm to stop her from pressing the cellphone against his cheek, finally escaping her attacks. Completely inexplicable. Fear pouted and shook off Haruaki's hand, then typed on the cellphone again.

'I had a dream.'

"Aha... The first dream of the year. Then let me ask, what did you dream about?"

'Before going to sleep, you mentioned that dreaming of Mount Fuji, a hawk and an eggplant would be very lucky.'^[9]

"Now that you mention it, I think I did."

It's all your fault! Fear seemed to be complaining while baring her fangs, pressing the cellphone buttons with greater fervor. Perhaps getting used to the process, Fear's typing speed was much faster than when she first started, although there were a few missing characters occasionally from typing too impatiently.

'You all appeared. Kuroe used a remote control to transform Mount Fuji into a giant robot then Kirika shrieked with laughter as she cracked her whip and sat on top. Meanwhile, a completely nude Cow Tits shot down a hawk with an exorcism arrow then proceeded to take giant bites as she ate it raw.'

"What kind of chaotic dream is that..."

"Rather than chaotic, why is my image so weird!? I-I can't believe how this child would treat me in this manner right at the very start of the new year...!"

Peering from the side at the cellphone in Fear's hand, Konoha frowned and groaned. With trembling shoulders, Fear continued to type:

'Then there's the shameless brat! You were holding an eggplant while going "Don't worry, shove it in! Shove it in!" and approaching me with a lewd grin! Totally shameless!'



"Blaming this kind of dream on me really bothers me!"

While the group was in a clamor, the priest returned to the living room. "Looks like everyone slept well." He commented without any intention of irony, causing them to feel embarrassed. At this moment, Kirika also got up so the group went to the washroom together.

One after another, they used cold water to wash their faces. First was Kirika who looked the most sleepy, then came Fear followed by Haruaki. While casually watching Konoha wash her face, Kirika spoke up, apparently completely awake at last:

"It ended up developing into a completely unexpected start for the new year."

"...Yeah."

Haruaki nodded lightly and looked towards Fear. Fear originally wanted to type on the cellphone but immediately stopped. After pressing the delete key a good many times, she wrote something new. Finally, with a slightly lonely expression, she held out the cellphone before Haruaki and the rest.

'Sorry, it's my fault for being too careless.'

"No, that's not what I meant. I was just thinking how unexpected the situation is. This isn't your fault, Fear-kun, I'm not trying to blame this on anyone."

"Yeah, so you should relax. We'll immediately help demand the return of your voice... Oh, but just as always, I'm not sure if I'll be able to help, that's all."

Haruaki spoke with a wry smile. Fear bowed her head slightly, her fingers hovering over the cellphone's keys—Then she ended up not typing anything.

"What's the matter?"

Only after Haruaki asked did Fear begin to type. Very slowly, she smiled with a bit of loneliness.

'Even if I remember how to type, it's not enough. There's clearly so much I wanna say, but typing cannot keep up.'

Then she immediately pressed the delete key.

The words disappeared.

The words, which Fear had devoted her full effort to say, easily disappeared just like that.

But Haruaki was not going to forget. This was even less likely to forget compared to actually listening to her words by ear. The words just now were Fear's true thoughts. Her current expression was Fear's true feelings. Hence, he could not forget. Furthermore, he must brand them into his heart.

(Yes, that's right... We must demand the return of her voice.)

With that, an ordinary New Year would surely return instantly. Joyous and lively, irreplaceable everyday time together would start to flow again as usual.

Hence, Haruaki stroked Fear's silver hair vigorously as he said:

"Oh right, people do say that first dreams will come true. Although that chaotic dream of yours can't possibly come true literally—in a certain sense, it will be fulfilled, right?"

"...?"

"Like right now, the feeling of everyone together, noisy and lively. In other words—This year will be no different from usual, so there's nothing to worry about."

Fear smiled lightly then shook her head as though embarrassed, shaking off Haruaki's hand that was on her head. Next, as though with renewed vigor—or rather, pouting with slight displeasure—she began to type on the cellphone at the same time:

'Shameless brat, in other words, what happened earlier basically means this. Because first dreams will come true, you very well might really try to shove eggplants into my body in the future. Then you'll force me to obediently accept—'

"Shove eggplants... into...?"

Looking at the cellphone screen from the side, Kirika instantly glared viciously at Haruaki. He frantically explained:

"Y-You were still sleeping just now, Class Rep, so you may not be aware, but we're talking about her first dream! This has absolutely nothing to do with me in reality. The content of her dream was completely inexplicable!"

'In the past, you have said inexplicable stuff like "It'll fit! Let's just put the front end in first!"'

"Oh... To think that such specific words have appeared, how concerning. Such specific dreams usually appear as the result of certain memories from reality. In other words... Yachi, perhaps you have spoken such words in the past indeed...!"

'That's right! Every time an incident ends, you say that kind of thing while shoving it in! Shoving into my most embarrassing spot!'

"That's something else, right!?"

"S-Something else? Th-That's even more... A-A-Absolutely ridiculous!"

"Class Rep, you should already know about the Indulgence Disks, right!? Could it be that you're still not awake?"

Amidst the usual voices, there was indeed one person's share missing.

But this noisy clamor did indeed allow one to predict that the usual times were about to return very soon.

Part 6

After a while, they reached the forest's limits and arrived at a wide open space. Before them was a pond roughly the size of a school swimming pool, filled with clear and pristine pond water. In front of the pond was a small shrine with a miniature torii roughly the size of a fox god Inari statue. There should be no question that this is the place described by the priest.

There were currently no signs of Chihaya and Isuzu. Haruaki's group hid themselves among the trees growing behind the pond, holding their breath for the two girls to appear. Then—

(...They're coming!)

A glasses-wearing delinquent shrine maiden with dyed hair, dressed in a t-shirt and a hakama whose side slits offered glimpses at her thighs. In contrast, there was also a black-haired shrine maiden dressed impeccably in her shrine outfit. Chihaya yawned from lack of sleep while Isuzu smiled

serenely. Without noticing Haruaki's group in hiding, they slowly walked out of the forest.

Grabbing the collar of Fear who reflexively tried to rush out, Haruaki continued to bide their time. Pouncing on them right now could very well cause them to flee into the forest again. At the very least, they should wait until the two girls reached the front of the shrine.

Just as the two shrine maidens arrived before the shrine, the surroundings suddenly became incomparably bright. Haruaki narrowed his eyes and half-involuntarily looked up at the sky, filled with the warm rays of the sun.

The world was being shrouded by a gentle glow. Covering the sky was a kind of ambiguous color. As though seeping out from the edge of the heavens, the color of brightness was gradually filling up the originally dark sky. Under the cover of the forest, the view of the light source was obscured. Even so, this was undoubtedly the New Year's first rays of dawn. The start of a brand new year.

Splash! The sound of water prompted Haruaki to shift his gaze away from the dreamy beauty of the sky. He was instantly stunned.

Chihaya had picked up a bucket that was probably kept by the side of the shrine. Scooping up water from the pond, she poured it over her head. Exhaling "phew~", she used her fingers to wipe the water droplets from her glasses. The ice-cold pond water drenched her entire body. Her hair clung to her face. As always, her thighs were visible from the slits on the sides of her hakama, with beads of water sliding down her bare skin. The t-shirt with its rolled-up sleeves was also clinging tightly to her body, displaying the curves of attractive bulges. More than that, something beneath became overly visible—

"...Haruaki-kun, what are you staring at?"

"I-I'm not staring at anything!"

The voice from behind caused Haruaki to avert his gaze frantically. But if he did not watch, how would he know when to initiate the ambush? In any case, he tried his best to prevent his gaze from focusing on one point, then slowly he turned his head to observe Chihaya's situation—Another sound was heard. The sound of friction from the hakama.

Chihaya stood upright in one spot, gently reaching forward with both arms. Straight in front of her were the shrine, the pristine pond and the gradually

rising sun. As though offering a dance to these three entities, Chihaya began to move her body. On her face was a lack of expression that transcended solemnity.

Tracing out circular steps, she turned her body towards the right and to the left. Crouching, getting up—Although this series of movements was performed without haste, a unique atmosphere of tension still exuded from the focus displayed by her limbs.

A shrine maiden's perfected dance that one could not help but watch with bated breath.

Was this sense of mystery due to the location? Or because it was during the dawn hours? Or perhaps some other reason? The dance's tempo gradually quickened. Despite not changing very much in actual speed, the differentiation between forceful and gentle movements served to emphasize the contrast between motion and stillness.

Chihaya danced, simply continuing to dance silently.

The pristine and cold water turned into droplets and scattered from her hair, arms, fingertips and body, glistening brightly under the special rays of the rising sun. Her red hakama fluttered slightly, making noises similar to leather-soled sandals as it brushed against the ground. She repeated these movements without pause—

Time passed without noticing.

Suddenly, everything stopped. Chihaya exhaled and stood up. Isuzu, who had been watching her dance with a smile all this time, took out and handed her a towel from the bag that Chihaya had entrusted to her before starting the dance. While using the towel to wipe away the sweat and the water droplets, Chihaya also took the cellphone that Isuzu handed over next and began to operate it in a bored manner. Only at this time did Haruaki's group finally realize she had stopped dancing. The period of fantasy and mystery had ended. Finally, they remembered what they needed to do.

"N-Now is not the time to be mesmerized... Everyone ready?"

'Ready anytime!'

"I don't mind starting the operation but what do we do exactly?"

"I really don't think we can make them do what we want through a calm and peaceful discussion... Looks like a little force needs to be used, more or less. No matter what, it'd be a problem if we let them run away again.'

"Yeah! Anyway, in order to prevent them from running away, let's show them how terrifying we can be. Once they begin to think: 'We can't possibly win~ Please forgive us~', it'll be okay. I guess we could all rush out and surround them at once—Hmm, then Kiririn and I should circle over to the other side of the plaza, then make an entrance like that very active fishing girl in a certain action game, swinging out with a whoosh just like that."^[10]

"I don't really get what you're referring, but I can imagine it roughly. Let's do it."

"If they throw another flash grenade, things could get very tricky... Let's hope that we finish it quickly without wasting too much time. Anyway, don't be too violent since we're indebted to the priest's kindness."

I know that! Fear pouted as though saying that. Then everyone in Haruaki's group exchanged glances with one another, nodded and started the operation in one go.

Fear and Konoha jumped out from behind the trees where they were hiding and made a mad dash forward. A beat later, Haruaki rushed out after them as well. Kuroe and Kirika called out:

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

"«Tragic Black River»!"

Extending their hair and belt respectively, the two girls traversed the plaza in front of the shrine by entangling their respective weapons to the branches of trees on the opposite side. Jumping after a short running start, they simultaneously shortened their hair and belt respectively to pull themselves to the opposite forest, instantly traveling to behind Chihaya and Isuzu.

"What... Why are you guys here...!?"

"Oh dear~"

Chihaya was greatly shocked while Isuzu surveyed their surroundings calmly. It was too late already. The two of them were completely surrounded by the five members of Haruaki's group.

Grim expressions on their faces, Fear and Konoha sprinted side by side, making a beeline for Isuzu. Give it back right now! Fear's eyes were filled with such rage as she transformed the Rubik's cube into a wheel of torture—namely, the «Breaking Wheel of Francia». Continuing to dash quickly, she threw the wheel using the immense momentum of her fearsome charge. However—

"There were many of these wild spirits who would not obey, sometimes they were persuaded, and even then if they still would not obey, they were removed by force. As a result, the stones, trees, all the grass and weeds, and even each and every leaf that spoke like humans speak, so that it was so noisy then, obeyed the order to be silent!"

Instead of dodging the torture wheel, Isuzu simply chanted a passage. After that—

Just in front of Isuzu's body, Fear's wheel was silently deflected.

"!?"

Of course, Fear had not gone all out, but even so, the attack was blocked too effortlessly. Fear showed an expression of surprise while reaching out to catch the wheel that suddenly flew back from her pulling its chain. Immediately, she transformed it into a hatchet for close quarters combat. Meanwhile, Konoha had already circled over next to Isuzu and performed a palm strike towards her head with a mighty shout. But just as Konoha's palm was about to touch her, it was silently stopped.

"Hmm... The air became like a shield...?"

"It's named the wordless wall~ In order to drive away the rioting spirits, the plants went silent while the gods ruling Japan descended from heaven~"

"Really, thank you for the concise explanation...!"

Konoha withdrew her palm and distanced herself from Isuzu—Or rather, she pretended to do so but was actually performing a sweeping kick against Isuzu's legs, but this too was blocked by the silent wall. This defensive shield apparently surrounded Isuzu's entire body. Just as Konoha clicked her tongue—

"But sticking to defense alone will not bring any improvement to the situation~ Well then—And heavenly reeds were cut into bits, and

splintering like needles, while instructions were given to read out the great purification ritual!"

Isuzu swung her arms forcefully. Greatly alarmed, Konoha swiftly leapt from her original location and swung her karate chop in midair. Although Haruaki could not see anything tangible, Konoha appeared to be facing some kind of attack. Warily, Konoha entered a defensive stance and said: "Fear-san, please exercise more caution... Just now, something resembling needles of air were flying towards me. Although warning signs can be seen through careful examination of distortions in the air, carelessness must still be avoided."

Fear was originally showing a surprised expression after seeing Konoha's movements. At this moment, she made a grim face and readied her hatchet. Isuzu looked like she had the ability to control natural phenomena such as wind or air. Despite looking totally harmless, she was actually an opponent that required great caution to face.

However—it was not completely hopeless. Fear's voice must be returned, by all means necessary. Even if it meant resorting to a little underhandedness.

"Sorry, but we have to catch you... «Tragic Black River»!"

"Fufufu, time for the mischievous plan of shrine maiden bondage~"

"Kyah... Hey, let me go now!"

While Fear and Konoha were facing off against Isuzu, Kirika and Kuroe had extended their hair and belt respectively, entangling Chihaya's arms. Chihaya thrashed her limbs about madly then reached her hand into the bag she had received from Isuzu, intending to take something out. Naturally, her attempt was thwarted. Haruaki tackled and pinned her to the ground, preventing her from moving. Using this opportunity, the hair and belt tied up Chihaya's body, wrapping many layers over her. Almost caught up in the process, Haruaki frantically jumped away. Had he ended up tightly bound to the shrine maiden in the wet t-shirt, his life would be in danger next.

Noticing the situation on that end, Isuzu frowned:

"Oh dear~ How troublesome, Chihaya-sama has been..."

"Hold on, why are you guys suddenly capturing me!? What did I do? Release me now! My being a curse expert has nothing to do with you guys!"

Chihaya was sitting on the ground like a prisoner, roaring angrily while the only intimidating things remaining about her were her voice and facial expression.

"I don't care about the curse expert issue right now...! That said, I still hope you'll stop doing that! Anyway, hurry up and return the voice that she stole from Fear! Then we'll talk!"

Nevertheless, Chihaya's reaction was different from imagined. Making an expression of utter bafflement, she asked in return:

"Wha...? Voice...?"

How odd.

"Hey... Do you actually not know? That girl—Isuzu—what she's done."

"Like I would know. What are you guys talking about? What voice? Why would I ask her to do that? How would I benefit from her doing that!?"

"But in actual fact, Fear can't talk anymore!"

What on earth? Chihaya was in the dark? Speaking of which, back when Isuzu kissed Fear, Chihaya was apparently roaring: "What the heck are you doing!?" In that case, was this really something that Isuzu had done on her own accord? But for what purpose?

"Hey Isuzu, you imbecile! Are you really responsible for one of them losing their voice? Answer me now!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... That is the truth~"

Isuzu nodded and answered with calm composure.

"Y-You imbecile... How dare you do something so outrageous without my permission...!"

"Let me be clear, we have no intention of hurting you two. Also, we've promised the priest—your father—already. In any case, please order that girl to return the voice."

"Wha? Tsk... Oh I see, so that's what happened. That guy told you about this place. Damn it, totally useless, this pisses me off... Everything is pissing me off!"

"You can be pissed off for all I care, but please heed our request. I don't suppose you enjoy being tied up for something you had no part in, right?"

"Duh! Hey Isuzu, I don't care what it is, just hurry up and give it back!"

Chihaya roared loudly while shaking her bound, upper body. She seemed to be truly angry about Isuzu doing something incomprehensible. Nevertheless, Isuzu still said:

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Isuzu doesn't want to return it~ Because it's in Chihaya-sama's interest~"

"How... is it... in my interest!? It's all because of you that I'm in this current state!"

Chihaya's eyes, filled with anger, glared at Isuzu. Isuzu simply cocked her head in a dilemma. Hand poised for a karate chop, Konoha used this chance of silence to interject:

"If you are absolutely unwilling to return it... We will resort to seizing it back by force."

"Please excuse Isuzu, but Isuzu has no intention of losing~"

"Oh my, is that so? Cursed bell. Rather, please allow me to address you directly as 'a mere cursed bell.' Even if you perform more unbelievable spells, I have no intention of losing to a mere ornament like a bell. I am a weapon. The demon blade in opposition to the House of Tokugawa. Could you understand if I phrase it that way?"

"Oh dear... Muramasa? That would truly..."

"Furthermore, this child here is a cursed cube of torture and execution. Although no match for me, her familiarity with blood and battle is surely more than yours at least. If you still think you have a chance of victory after hearing these words, then your confidence is truly considerable."

Konoha's deliberately chosen words were simply a threat of course—In other words, a bluff. The two of them were essentially limited to direct attacks and would probably have trouble breaking past Isuzu's defensive

wall. But if bluffing could eliminate the battle, it would make things much easier.

"Wha... For real...?"

"...It's the truth. Although I've no idea how powerful Isuzu actually is, these girls are really strong. And they have all sorts of secret moves."

Hearing Chihaya's groan, Haruaki added to the bluff on the scene. Chihaya bit her lower lip and looked towards Konoha and Fear in front as well as Kuroe and Kirika behind.

"And the other two are clearly no ordinary people either...! It's obvious that one cannot win against five! Hey Isuzu, that's enough from you, obey me now! An imbecile like you can't possibly defeat them. Or are you fine with being destroyed? Say, have you forgotten that I'm currently a hostage!?"

"No, that fact is not forgotten~"

"Then could you stop chatting leisurely!? Who knows when this weird hair and belt will start strangling my neck!? If I feel any pain, you should best prepare yourself, I'm gonna make you suffer a hundred fold!"

Then the conversation ended again. Chihaya's stare and Isuzu's conflicted smile faced each other silently.

Finally, Isuzu shrugged lightly.

"It really can't be helped... And Chihaya-sama can't be left in that state indefinitely. Very well, understood, you may have it back~"

Isuzu sighed but before Fear actually recovered her voice, they could not afford to relax. Watching Chihaya who was still bound, Isuzu approached Fear with lively footsteps. Fear scowled and typed with her free hand that was not holding the hatchet.

"Uh... 'Return it, yes, but you're not gonna use that method again, are you?' Yes~ For an ordinary person, all it takes is simply skin contact and Isuzu can return it immediately simply by thought alone. But for people like you girls, the voice can only be extracted directly from the throat~ So returning it requires following the same steps~ So here goes!"

"...!"

Isuzu embraced Fear and forced a kiss on her lips. Fear stared with wide-eyed surprise as though she were saying "At least let me prepare myself first!", waving the cellphone in her hand helplessly. Despite surprised, Konoha remained standing right behind Isuzu with her karate chop ready, instantly able to attack if anything happened.

"Mmm! Mmm..."

"Muugo... Mmmph..."

Fear's body shook violently. After a while, she finally pushed Isuzu away forcefully. Then—

"Mmm... Puhaah! Th-That's enough from you, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two! J-Jeez, is this really necessary? There must be other ways, right!? If that's the case, I'll curse you! I'll curse you for a lifetime!"

Perhaps due to lacking in oxygen or other reasons, Fear's face was all red as she swung the hatchet strenuously and threatened Isuzu. However, she suddenly halted in her movements and cocked her head in surprise.

"F-Fear! You're able to speak now!"

"Ohoh! Ah~ Ah~ Ooh~ For real! I'm cured!"

Hand to her throat while performing vocal exercises, Fear suddenly shook her silver hair and looked towards Haruaki. However, her happy gaze only lasted for an instant before she curled her lips malevolently:

"Fufufu... How brave of you, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two! How dare you do something like that to me? Truly unforgivable! Completely and utterly unforgivable!"

"Excuse me~ Please allow me to ask in fear and trepidation... What do you mean by 'number two'~?"

"Number One is that girl who's tied up over there, because she's the shrine maiden who's shameless in appearance! In contrast, you're the shrine maiden who's shameless in behavior, so obviously you're Number Two! Anyway, the name doesn't matter right now, what should I do? How should I deal with you...!?"

"Hey Fear, calm down. Anyway, you've got your voice back already. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Although not everything is said and done... This does count as a conclusion. How troubling, what an absolutely ridiculous commotion."

"Ugh! Crap, I forgot to take a photo just now. Clearly it was an excellent shutter chance..."

Exhaling in relief, Kirika and Kuroe also gathered around. Konoha shrugged:

"I do agree that we're not done with the talking... For example, why did you do that? Simply as a prank? If that's the case, forget it, but we still need to discuss the matter of the curse expert."

"Hey Cow Tits, I'm not gonna forget it just like that! How could this be settled just by dismissing it as a prank!?"

"Oh dear~ How troubling, it looks like they still won't let you and Isuzu off. Chihaya-sama, what should be done~?"

Isuzu turned her face. At the same time, Haruaki also looked at Chihaya, who was looking extremely displeased. Gruffly, she whispered:

"About that... I don't really care what you guys wanna do, but could you untie me first? Say, I just wanna hurry home and get changed right now. Achoo!"

"Oh, Isuzu remembers now. The key reason why Isuzu finally compromised was due to worrying about Chihaya-sama catching a cold if this continued~ Isuzu hereby begs everyone~"

Due to too many things happening, they had forgotten.

Chihaya was still dressed in the drenched shrine maiden outfit and the see-through t-shirt. On top of that, she was being tied up by the belt and hair—How should one put it? The sight was extremely questionable. It really felt like a scene that would surely be used in Kuroe's deck of dark karuta cards had there been a Japanese-style version.

Naturally, the instant Haruaki saw Konoha smile and extend her fingers, he immediately closed his eyes to avoid disaster.

But regrettably, or rather, completely predictably—

In spite of his efforts, Haruaki was still unable to escape the disaster known as the immorality breaker.

Part 7

The group first returned to the priest's residence. Since the priest had not yet returned after going to work in the morning, Chihaya opened the door herself. Currently, the only place able to contain so many was the living room, so that was where everyone went.

"Ahhh, damn it, in any case, let me get changed first."

"By all means. But it'd be a problem if you escaped, so please allow me to accompany you."

"Fine, whatever suits your fancy. In return, I'll treat you as a lesbian who wants to watch me change. Record this, I need to record this..."

"Why do you deliberately record mocking insults in your cellphone...?"

"It's my freedom to do so. Something like a habit—Anyway, that's enough, I'm fucking pissed off! If that guy hadn't ratted out where I was, I won't be under your surveillance right now! That shitty father...!"

These profanities had been repeated many times by Chihaya along the way back already. It seemed like she was particularly upset about her father being responsible for her capture.

Recalling this again, Chihaya's anger erupted further, stomping her way out of the living room as though trying to break the floorboards. Konoha followed her, leaving Haruaki, Fear, Kuroe, Kirika and Isuzu behind. Fear and the rest continued to monitor Isuzu vigilantly. On the other hand, Isuzu simply sat smiling in formal seiza posture, staring at an old-style television. The television was running the first news programme of the new year, showing scenes of a New Year's first shrine visit at a large and magnificent shrine while the news anchor was narrating with a calm voice. Next came the weather report. Sure enough, heavy rain was likely for the evening. Haruaki wondered if they would be able to return home before then.

The living room's structure was virtually the same as in Haruaki's own home. Sliding open the paper door gave access to the veranda while the garden was outside. The only difference was that this place did not have the detachable style of rain shutters and glass windows. But with the sliding door closed and the heat on, these were minor, imperceptible differences. As though being at home, it felt very calming. At the same time, the news anchor's monotonous voice could be heard—

(Huah... Now that Fear's voice is retrieved, having relaxed, I feel sleepy again.)

Just as Haruaki yawned, Fear sat down beside him.

"Hey Haruaki, I've got something to ask you."

"Hmm, what is it?"

Resting her index finger against her chin, Fear went "hmm~" in thought and looked up at the ceiling.

"How should I say this? It's about Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One just now. She hates her father?"

"Oh... I don't really know either. It's true that judging from her attitude, they probably don't get along very well. Also, she keeps calling him 'that guy' or 'shitty father.'"

"Don't you call Honatsu something similar from time to time... Muumuu? In that case... that also means you hate Honatsu, right?"

Fear sat with her arms crossed, her body inclined to one side along with her head. Haruaki could not help but find the conversation developing towards a rather uncomfortable direction. Regarding the father who was never at home, always wandering in leisure all over the world, it was impossible for Haruaki to sum up his feelings in a single word such as like or hate. No, even if this were not the case, an ordinary high schooler would only be able to say that parents were parents without deliberately contemplating the problem of like or dislike.

(Oh... Really?)

Fear cocked her head, watching Haruaki intently. Haruaki could get a vague sense that this was because she was neither an ordinary high schooler or a normal human, which was why this kind of question occurred to her.

Nevertheless, Haruaki's heart did not have the correct answer to this problem either, so he could only admit honestly.

"Hmm... Actually, I don't know either. Whether how I regard Old Pops or how this girl sees her father. Because there are many complicated factors."

"It's like that...?"

Fear did not seem completely satisfied and turned her gaze away from Haruaki. Then staring at the tatami floor, she murmured to herself:

"Because... I don't have what one would call parents. How should I say this? I don't quite get what's a normal parent-child relationship. In other words... I'm sure I haven't correctly understood the concept of parents and children. Of course, this kind of knowledge exists in my mind through listening to others or watching television, but I can't say I've experienced any of it myself."

Fear smiled with a bit of loneliness. A smile carrying forlornness and self-mockery.

"I have seen parents and children in the past—Naturally, these were all parents and children standing before the violent tool that I was. There were those who hoped that their family could be spared, unconcerned about their own fates; others only begged for mercy for themselves and did not care if their family was killed; then there were those who all went mad equally and died... Reactions mostly did not deviate from these categories. But I know at least that parent-child relationships under those extreme condition cannot be taken as reference, but that's all I know."

"Fear..."

Haruaki suddenly noticed that Kuroe and Kirika were looking towards him and Fear. However, they simply listened to Fear's words with narrowed eyes without saying anything. This probably meant they were leaving the issue for Haruaki to handle.

"...What's important is the future. From now on, just keep on learning all kinds of knowledge and understand them gradually. Don't worry about speed. Even I've never pondered anything philosophical like the true meaning of parent-child relationships."

"I guess so... Muu. Crap, why does the conversation feel so depressing now? I just wanted to kill some time by chatting while that girl's changing... This is all her fault, that Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One! The priest clearly gave us the information in good faith, but she keeps complaining nonstop!"

Perhaps noticing the atmosphere at hand, Fear deliberately acted talkative and loud. Suddenly, Isuzu, who had been watching television silently, interjected:

"A thousand apologies~ Back when Isuzu first encountered Chihaya-sama, her attitude towards Father has always been like this~ However, she does treat Mother with great gentleness~"

"Muu!" Fear glared at Isuzu sharply. Haruaki understood Fear's feelings of wariness but Isuzu had been very cooperative ever since she returned Fear's voice. Talking to her should be fine, at least.

"Mother... You're talking about Chihaya's mother? We heard from the priest that she's currently hospitalized?"

"Something like that~ Back when Chihaya-sama gained ownership of Isuzu, Mother was not in this home already~"

"Then how do you know she treats her mother with great gentleness?"

"Because Chihaya-sama frequently takes clean clothes along to visit Mother~ The hospital is near the route to school, so even when she skips school, she still goes to visit her~ Isuzu basically waits outside the hospital every time, but one day, Isuzu sneaked a peek through the window of the sickroom and saw Chihaya-sama smiling very radiantly~"

"Hmm~ Incredible to believe. If that's really true, then her attitudes to each parent are opposites. Is there something different between fathers and mothers...?"

"My family background is quite complicated, so I'll just talk about family situations in general—Girls usually keep their distances from their fathers, Fear-kun."

"Something like 'Ewww! Don't mix my clothes together with Daddy's in the washing machine, that's gross~' Stuff like that~ Good luck to the Daddies over the world~"

"Is that situation very common? Nuunuu, it's really difficult to understand..."

Fear crossed her arms again and frowned, then looked up as though she had just been struck by a sudden revelation. She kept glancing towards Haruaki, wanting to speak yet hesitating indecisively. After repeating these motions many times, she finally—

"Umm... Haruaki, I've wanted to ask you a long time ago, but always missed the chance. Or rather, it actually isn't anything that needs to be asked specially, so it was glossed over—"

Haruaki could already guess what Fear wanted to ask. There was nothing to hide in fact, so he spoke readily with initiative.

"Yes, you mean my mother, right?"

"Th-That's right. No no, it's not like I'm really that curious to know, so you don't have to feel compelled to say it—"

Fear was stammering, probably in consideration of his feelings. But clearly she could not discard her curiosity and kept sneaking peeks at Haruaki's face. Originally silent, Kirika suddenly looked at him with unease.

It's actually no big secret—Haruaki spoke with a wry smile:

"No, I actually haven't been able to find an opportunity to bring it up all this time. Rather, it's rarely mentioned so I never thought it was necessary to bring up. Uh... Ever since I could remember, she was already gone from our home. Old Pops said it was just an ordinary divorce. After all, given what a slacker Old Pops is, it can't be helped~ So, I can totally sympathize. That's all there is to it."

"Then that means... You've never met her?"

"Nope~ But because I've never seen her all along, I don't have any sad feelings either. She's probably living her new life somewhere out there, so all I can think of is wishing her happiness, hoping she could forget that bastard Old Pops."

After a few seconds of silence, Kuroe's incomparably gentle voice was heard.

"Then—conversely, Haru must find happiness as well. To this end, I will spare no effort~"

Kuroe and Konoha, who had moved into the Yachi home before Fear, already knew about Haruaki's mother from a long time ago. Hence, Kuroe spoke quietly with a smile without any surprise or worry. Haruaki scratched his head and said:

"Happiness would be a bit exaggerated... Yes, after all, I don't have any dissatisfaction with my current life. So you girls shouldn't mind it too much."

"Very well, since I already said I'd spare no effort, let me act first as a role model! Haru, don't suppress yourself anymore... You can call me 'mommy' and ask me to spoil you. It's totally fine. Come, rush into my embrace!"

Kuroe spread her arms as though saying "Come on!" Originally, the mood was a little embarrassing and Haruaki was feeling apologetic for making Fear and the others worry. However, this instantly restored the atmosphere to its original state. Haruaki felt thankful to Kuroe from the bottom of his heart but—

"No way! That kind of parent-child relationship would look clearly unbalanced to the extreme!"

"Eh~ I see now, I get it. So just as thought, Haru prefers women like Kono-san to take on the maternal role, right? Symbols of motherhood, almost jumping out in your face, are required. Sure enough, I can only conclude that Haru is a boobs kinda guy..."

"No, even if it's Konoha, I refuse to call her that!"

"Putting Cow Tits aside... On further thought, I seem to know certain things about you but not others. Okay, this is a good chance. Treat it as killing time. Tell us more."

"A-About?"

For some reason, Fear had sat up properly in seiza then leaned forward, bringing her face near Haruaki. Her expression was extremely serious but also carried dissatisfaction at the same time.

"Many things. Clearly, there's a lot that Kuroe and Cow Tits know but I don't. So how should I put this? It's totally unfair! So you have to tell me. Not just about your mother, but Honatsu as well, or the Yachi family, or what you were like as a child in the past!"

"Nice idea! I came to this home back when Haru was in middle school, so I'm curious about his elementary school life~ So many things to ask. Such as if you've ever done any embarrassing pranks? Was your first crush on a daycare nanny? Also, uh~ You took baths with your father until what age? —Say, Haru, have you ever bathed together with Kono-san before?"

"W-What, truly and absolutely ridiculous! This is something that I want cleared up without fail. Yachi, hurry up and answer us honestly! N-No, it's not like I'm curious about your childhood, simply that it's helpful for my responsibilities as the class representative to understand more of a classmates' background growing up..."

For some reason, even Kuroe and Kirika were joining in. Especially Kirika who looked greatly enthusiastic.

"Oh what a shame. If we were at home, we could have asked Haru questions while flipping through the photo albums for topics."

"Oh, photo albums... I see... Those do exist as well...! Possibly... Ahhh... There might be photos of Yachi in shorts, or riding a tricycle—A-Absolutely ridiculous! Next time we go to your house, don't forget to show them to me!"

"But anyway, let's start talking, Haruaki! Okay, get on with it now!"

Fear pounded the tatami to hurry Haruaki. To be honest, this was really too embarrassing. Talking about embarrassing childhood memories would be nothing more than a shaming game. Especially since they were currently in someone else's house. In front of the watchful eyes of the smiling Isuzu, whom they only met today, it was even more embarrassing.

So, what ways were there to escape? In the end, Haruaki could only come up with an exceedingly common method.

"Uh... Before that, I'd like to borrow the washroom."

"Muu! Shameless brat, are you trying to escape!"

"I'm not. Really, I'm just going to the washroom."

"Then it can't be helped... I almost forgot, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One is currently changing. Peeking is not allowed."

"I'm not going to peek! Besides, Konoha is there, right? If I have to suffer another Immorality Breaker, my life could very well be in danger...! My eyes are still hurting. No matter who begs me, I'm not going anywhere near that girl's room!"

"Good for you. Anyway, our conversation isn't over. Come back quick!"

Hence, Haruaki finally escaped from the living room. While recalling the direction the priest had told him earlier when they were resting in the house, he made his way to the washroom along the dark corridor. While pondering unimportant questions like "why do I involuntarily tiptoe when walking in someone else's house?", Haruaki reached the washroom.

(Phew~ Although the final turn in the flow of conversation became unexpected... I guess I just need to gloss over things as necessary and last until Konoha and Chihaya return.)

Inside the cramped space, Haruaki could not help but feel a sense of relief while doing his business in the washroom without hurrying. Regarding Chihaya and Isuzu, there was still unfinished business. Once Konoha and Chihaya returned, there was probably no leisure to discuss his childhood. Haruaki only hoped for this topic to die down naturally.

(So, after they get back, what we need to do is... Listen to their reasons first before finding a way to convince them to give up the curse expert job. Although it looks like it won't be easy... Hmm, but anyway, it sure beats lying in wait and having a great battle for the sake of retrieving Fear's voice.)

Haruaki pondered what was to come while leaving the washroom. Then just as he started walking—

He heard a faint creaking from the corridor floorboards.

Haruaki looked up.

Someone was standing in the dark corridor, as though waiting for him.

Haruaki's heart almost jumped out of his chest. Impossible to understand. Why was this happening?

Why was Isuzu standing here alone when she should be in the living room, under Fear and everyone else's surveillance?

—And fully nude as well.

"Wha...!"

Haruaki took a step back. With a serene smile, making no effort to hide her body, Isuzu simply stepped towards him. One step. Another step. Haruaki's back bumped into the wall at the end of the corridor. He was cornered. Isuzu drew nearer to him again. Why? Don't look. I should close my eyes. But should I really close my eyes? I clearly don't know what her intentions are.

Haruaki reopened his eyes hesitantly. But in that very instant—a soft and gentle weight enveloped Haruaki's entire body. Isuzu had embraced him. Haruaki half-opened his eyes to see her long, black hair as well as the

pale, white back where her sleek, soft hair flowed over. Haruaki did not allow his gaze to shift any further down.

"..."

Silently, Isuzu simply exhaled lightly towards his ear as though she were giggling.

Then she opened her mouth and took in Haruaki's earlobe, moving her tongue nimbly—

(Huh...?)

Haruaki felt his strength draining rapidly.



Then the world before his eyes was plunged into darkness.

"Haruaki... Hey, Haruaki!"

Fear's voice could be heard. Opening his eyes, Haruaki saw the floorboards of the corridor where he was located before losing consciousness. Following the silver hair that lay spread out over the floor, he found Fear's face.

"I came for a look because you were too slow. What happened? Why are you sleeping in this kind of place? Even if you're sleep-deprived, you'll catch a cold if you sleep here. Or did you actually go to Number One's room to peek and get beaten up viciously by Cow Tits?"

How could that possibly be true! Haruaki protested while standing up. Something was not right. Fear watched suspiciously.

Haruaki tried to speak again. How long was I out for?

"..."

Fear's gaze turned even sharper. Haruaki reached out to touch his throat then came to a stunned revelation.

This time, it was his turn to have his voice stolen.

Part 8

Back to the living room, Fear was already holding a drill in her hand.

"Damn you! What are you thinking!?"

"F-Fear-kun, what's the matter?"

"Your face looks scary~ Did something happen?"

"Not just anything happened! This time—it's Haruaki's turn to be unable to speak!"

Kirika and Kuroe stared wide-eyed. Seeing their gazes, Haruaki nodded. But there was something completely baffling. Kirika and Kuroe seemed to be harboring the same doubts on this issue.

"But—This girl was here all along."

"Yeah, although not to the point of keeping eyes on her for every second... At the very least, she has never walked out of this living room."

Just like before Haruaki had gone to the washroom, Isuzu was still sitting formally in seiza with a serene expression, staring at the television intently. But right now, her gaze was naturally shifted towards Fear who was pointing the drill at her.

"What? Muu~ On further thought, Haruaki was attacked after he went to the toilet but this girl really was still here at the time... The same goes for when I went off to find Haruaki... What's going on?"

Indeed, what on earth was going on? Was that person really Isuzu? After all, the conditions were dark. Thinking back upon it, Haruaki began to have doubts and could not be certain. Furthermore, he had no idea why the other person was completely nude... Could it be that beginning at some point, his memories were actually part of a dream after he had fainted?

"Hey Haruaki, because the answer was too obvious, I didn't ask you just now... Who stole your voice? It must be this girl, right?"

"..."

"Oh yeah, you can't answer. So—Okay, let me return this to you. Now, our positions are reversed."

Saying that, Fear handed the cellphone over to Haruaki. Pressing keys on the cellphone made Haruaki impatient but he still opened up the texting screen and entered words.

'I think it should be that girl but I'm not confident. Since she was here all along, I could have been mistaken.'

"Uumu, it's uncertain..."

Just as Fear peered forward at the cellphone screen and frowned, footsteps were heard from the corridor's direction.

"Ah, so cold... Once the hot water is boiled, I'm taking a bath immediately. And this house is old and decrepit to being with, there are frequent drafts to begin with. Oh, there's even a hole on this sliding paper door. This is totally the worst."

"No matter what, we don't intend to provide you with time to take a bath. We want to settle this as soon as possible to hurry home... Eh, w-what is this!?"

The paper door connected to the veranda slid open with Konoha and Chihaya entering. Chihaya had apparently changed out of her wet clothes but she was still dressed in the same style of shrine maiden outfit. Who could have expected extras?

"No need to go 'what is this.' This time, it's Haruaki's voice that has been stolen."

"What did you say...!?"

Konoha suddenly narrowed her eyes and glared at Isuzu whom Fear was currently pointing at with the drill.

"She attacked Haruaki while he was making a visit to the washroom. But Kirika and Kuroe have been monitoring this girl all along and she hasn't taken a single step out of this living room. The situation is puzzling..."

"W-Wait a sec! If she didn't step out, then it can't possibly be Isuzu's doing! Then why are you still pointing that dangerous thing at her!?"

"Even if she didn't step out, that doesn't mean she couldn't steal Haruaki's voice. Maybe this girl here has other powers. She could have lied when claiming she needed to steal voice through contact when she actually has the ability to steal from a distance. So lemme ask you and you must answer clearly... Did you steal Haruaki's voice?"

All this time, Isuzu had been smiling as usual, gazing calmly at the tip of Fear's lethal weapon.

Hence—

It was only natural that she answered while maintaining that smile.

"Yes, that is precisely the case~"

Because she replied too readily and confessed too concisely, Haruaki had to spend a second to understand her words. But Fear and the others did not even need a second to react.

The drill was thrust forward. Konoha took a leap over the table. Kuroe and Kirika extended their hair and belt respectively.

However—Clearly Fear and the girls were not the only ones who knew what they had to do instantly. Before their attacks could strike Isuzu—

"...Pwah!?"

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew in from the garden. The paper sliding door was blown into the air, the table flew up, the old CRT television slid off its stand, the cupboard in the living room also fell over with a crash. Naturally, Haruaki lost balance ended up colliding his back against the wall. At the same time, seeing Chihaya's body flying towards him, he hastily caught her in his arms.

"Th-That really hurts... Y-You great big pervert! Where do you think you're grabbing!?"

It's unavoidable! Haruaki screamed but of course, no words came out.

Fear and the others were not blown away but rendered immobile by the sudden gust of raging wind. Isuzu was the only one able to move. Amidst the turbulent flow entering the living room from the garden, there seemed to be one single reverse flow that only she could harness. Hence, with her shrine maiden outfit fluttering in the wind, Isuzu floated lightly out into the garden.

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two... Are you trying the same trick again!?"

"Yes~ Because after repeated contemplation, Isuzu came to the conclusion that there are things that still needed to be done. Chihaya-sama has also changed apparently, so the current situation does not allow Isuzu to dally any further~"

"Incomprehensible... So you didn't steal her voice simply as a prank after all! What is your goal!?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, this is all for Chihaya-sama's interests~"

"I've said it before—I really don't get how this is good for me in any way!? Every time you do your own crazy things due to incomprehensible situations, I'm the one who suffers, do you get it? You imbecile, you're my slave so obey my orders without questioning!"

Still in Haruaki's arms, Chihaya yelled at Isuzu in the garden. Fear looked lightly over there and said:

"That's right. Listen well, the one catching your master right now is a shameless brat who'll astound you. Although he's only embracing her shamelessly right now, who knows when his sanity could fly away at any time. When that happens, no one can stop him. Those hands could strip the Shameless Shrine Maiden's clothes any moment, touching her thighs, he'll pant while licking the lenses of her glasses...! You'll personally witness peculiar abuse you've never seen before! If you don't want that to happen, don't flee and just return Haruaki's voice obediently!"

"...(As if I'd do any of that)!"

"H-He's moving his lips with a most scary expression...! Hey, Isuzu, this guy's serious! I absolutely do not want to be violated by this great big pervert, so hurry and save me!"

Chihaya struggled madly in Haruaki's embrace. As much as he wanted to clear up the misunderstanding, there was currently no time to type and show her on the cellphone screen. Besides, as soon as he let go, she would most likely fly towards Isuzu's side. With Fear and the others currently looking for a chance to charge towards Isuzu, it would be too dangerous.

But just as Fear and the girls were slowly approaching her and about to exit the living room, they suddenly stopped. What happened? Just as Haruaki wondered, he also heard the voice.

"W-What is going on...?"

The priest was standing in shock amidst the tragic chaos of the living room. Who knew if he returned for a break or to retrieve something he had forgotten, but to return with this kind of timing... What terrible luck.

There was no way to cover things up with a plausible explanation. The mess of the living room, Isuzu standing alone in the garden, Haruaki with Chihaya in his arms, Fear and the rest with their extraordinary aspects in display. Konoha aside, Fear's drill, Kirika's belt and Kuroe's long hair were impossible to deny.

Exhaling as though making a decision, Fear gave the the priest a slanted look and said:

"This might be totally incomprehensible to you—But let me give a simple explanation. Simply stated, we are cursed tools, tools that have gained self-awareness and human forms due to suffering excessive curses. That

girl called Isuzu is also another case like us. She's also stolen Haruaki's voice. So we're trying to punish her to demand the return of his voice. That's all."

"When accepting your hospitality earlier, what we claimed was stolen was a voice. This morning, she had stolen this child's voice, although it's already retrieved now... But she hasn't learnt her lesson and is doing it again."

"What... i-is this all about... Chihaya...?"

Greatly troubled, the priest looked over at Haruaki's group. Chihaya clicked her tongue with displeasure and turned her face away from the priest's gaze, then said in exasperation:

"You probably can't understand... But that seems to be the truth. Get it? If you get it, then hurry and leave. After all, it's got nothing to do with you and you're really an eyesore."

However, the priest did not move. Still with a troubled expression, he remained rooted to the spot as he moved his gaze across everyone. Then finally as though realizing something, he said:

"Oh... Stealing a voice... Could it be..."

"Chief Priest, what's the matter?"

"I just received notice that something fainted inside the shrine's confines. Although he woke up soon after, but, umm, who knows what shock he suffered, he became completely unable to make a sound."

"What did you say...!?"

Fear's expression turned grim as she gripped the drill even harder.

"Damn you, to think you'd also steal other people's voices!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... Yes, that is precisely the case~"

Isuzu answered with a smile.

"But there is no danger to their lives~ Unlike your kind, when ordinary humans lose their voices, they seem to suffer some degree of shock and end up fainting~"

"S-Stop screwing around! Why are you doing this!?"

"Isuzu you imbecile! As much as I think it's impossible, could it actually be...? My voice alone is not enough?"

Chihaya whispered in surprise, using the low and hoarse voice she had been speaking with all this time, one that did not seem to belong to a teenaged girl.

"Uh~ Strictly speaking, it's not quite the same~ However, it does not miss the mark very far~"

"What the heck... are you doing... What the heck are you doing!? This isn't what we agreed, right? You're my slave! My flunkie! You should obey me! Stop doing these weird things and come back now!"

"Isuzu will not stop."

Isuzu declared firmly. "What...!" Chihaya stopped speaking, her mouth open.

"Yes, Isuzu exists for Chihaya-sama indeed. It's true that she is a tool akin to a slave or a subordinate. Precisely because of that~ ...Isuzu has no choice but to do this. In order to make Chihaya-sama's wish come true, in order to protect what's precious to Chihaya-sama, Isuzu must devote her body and soul to Chihaya-sama, as the tool called Isuzu~"

After hearing these words, Fear bit her lower lip. So did Konoha and Kuroe—In other words, everyone in the same position as Isuzu were showing the same expression.

Next, Isuzu stepped back and extended her arms forward at the same time, as though trying to restrain Fear and the rest.

"W-Wait up!"

"Th-That's right! Listen carefully, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One is in our hands right now! We will begin the shameless humiliation that will even make her father faint!"

Don't say that in front of the priest! As much as Haruaki wanted to yell, he could not make a sound. Hence, he could only listen as Isuzu resumed speaking:

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... Isuzu knows very well that you people won't do that. If you had the intention, you would have done it already. So, Isuzu is not worried at all~"

"How could you... not worry...!"

Chihaya groaned but Isuzu cocked her head while smiling, then she looked at Chihaya with eyes filled with tender love like an older sister:

"Then Chihaya-sama, please allow me to say goodbye to you temporarily~ As for the dance offerings, even without Isuzu around, please continue to work hard! This is for your own good, Chihaya-sama, if you ever shirk your responsibility, Isuzu will know immediately~"

Isuzu turned around and ran towards the forest on the other end of the garden. Fear and the others wanted to chase after her but another gust of raging wind started to blow suddenly. Even in the living room, the wind pressure could be felt. Haruaki had no choice but to close his eyes. When he opened them again—Isuzu had already disappeared without trace.

Fear clicked her tongue, Konoha clenched her fist tightly, Kirika glared sharply while murmuring her usual catchphrase, and Kuroe simply shrugged and sighed. The priest remained shocked and flabbergasted, while Chihaya—

"Saying it's for my sake... Then leaving me behind... What kind of... joke is this...!?"

Head bowed down, she was murmuring to herself. Thinking he could not keep holding her in his arms, Haruaki thought it was time to release her so he let go.

In the next instant, Haruaki was struck by a blow from Chihaya's elbow.

Perhaps she was fearful of the abusive threats Fear had uttered just now, or simply venting her displeasure like a willful child—In any case, it was really painful as hell.

Chapter 3 - Whom Does the Shrine Maiden Dance for? / "Surely, for the man who lost(found) the words"

Part 1

In any case, the whole group started a planning conference directly in the Hayakawa living room. Despite the tragic remains of the paper sliding door and other articles, they simply piled up the debris in a corner to make enough space for everyone to sit.

"It's really true. Hmm... Fact really can be stranger than fiction in this world..."

In order to hold a discussion, the first thing they needed to do was to explain to the priest again. Since he had seen everything already, this could not be helped. Although it was not instant, in the end, the priest still believed in the explanations from Haruaki's group. After all, having witnessed Fear turning her drill back into the Rubik's cube and Kuroe moving her hair around, he probably thought that there was no choice but to believe. The priest seemed like quite an upstanding man in personality, so there was probably no risk of him publicizing this to others.

"Thank goodness you're willing to believe us. If possible, these are matters that we don't actually want to mention to others, but there's no choice given the circumstances... Of course, the problem at hand is how to stop Isuzu from stealing more voices. From the way she spoke, she definitely intends to continue her crimes. When the time comes, please lend us your assistance, Chief Priest."

"Yes... Of course. As long as it's something I can help with."

"After all, victims have appeared among the shrine visitors. She must be stopped. That said..."

"No matter what, we have too little information on our hands. We'd like to ask the person who knows her best."

Kirika looked at Chihaya, who was currently sitting on the veranda with her back towards Haruaki's group, looking down as she played with her cellphone. She seemed like she was rejecting everything.

"Hey~ I hope you can assist us, is that okay!?"

"..."

"Muu~ Ignoring me is so mean. Looks like this calling for me to explode with my super secret move... I'll tickle you until your tears run nonstop."

Kuroe's hair rustled as they danced, brushing against Chihaya's shoulder. Instantly, her shoulder shook in surprise but she immediately pushed the hair away with her hand in annoyance. Then after playing with her cellphone for quite a while, she finally sighed in exhaustion, apparently noticing everyone's gazes stuck on her back.

"...What do you guys wanna ask about?"

"Everything. Please tell us everything you know."

"Everything huh.. That girl is a cursed bell. I discovered her roughly a month ago in my home's storeroom. Then she asked if I'm willing to become her owner, so I took her in as my flunkie~"

"Then what about her curse or abilities?"

"Who knows. She only said that she was originally a tool used at some shrine. I didn't dig into her detailed origins at all. I also heard that she can pray like a shrine maiden to gods and bring about raging winds. As for the curse... You must have heard our exchange just now. Namely, my current, hoarse voice. After all, it doesn't matter if I'm getting a flunkie to do my every bidding in exchange."

"How could it not matter? So long as you continue to be her owner, your voice will never come back. No, not only that, as the curse increases in strength, the situation could very well become even more severe. Don't underestimate curses—That's right, this is the message we wanted to tell you in the first place."

Fear crossed her arms and stared intently at Chihaya's back.

"After a tool is cursed, it will begin to emanate its own curse, thereby causing human victims to give off further cursed thoughts—this is an endless cycle with absolutely no benefit to speak of. Even if it begins like a children's game, cursing behavior resembling a ritual is definitely not a good thing. That's why you shouldn't work as a curse expert or anything like that. Why do you do it?"

"This has nothing to do with the current incident, right? It's none of your business."

Chihaya rejected Fear's question with an extremely cold tone of voice.

"Curse expert...?" The priest also cocked his head and looked at Chihaya in puzzlement, but of course, she ignored him as well. Although it was expected already, even the priest did not know what work his daughter was doing? It looked like the father-daughter discord was really quite deep-rooted after all.

In any case, Chihaya did not seem like she wished to talk anymore about the curse expert issue. As though saying "it can't be helped," Kirika nodded and spoke:

"Anyway... The curse and voices? Looks like there might be clues there."

Perhaps due to returning to the topic, Chihaya scoffed indifferently and answered:

"However, I really have no idea why Isuzu would do that. I only found out today that she is able to steal a person's voice apart from my own."

This did not sound like lying. When Haruaki's group was catching them in front of the pond, Chihaya had questioned Isuzu: "Why did you do that!?" She had seemed quite angry about Isuzu taking action on her own. That could not have been an act.

"Hmm, we still don't seem able to get the information we want..."

"Even so, we can't stand back and do nothing. We must prevent the number of victims from increasing. More importantly—We must retrieve Haruaki-kun's voice."

Konoha's tone of voice was very quiet but carried a serious intensity that would bring chills to the listener. Haruaki could feel Konoha's unmistakable wrath. To be honest, he would not be surprised if her hands would slice apart the table they were resting on. Apart from Konoha, the other three girls were equally anxious.

"Of course. It was a rare chance to hear about Haruaki's childhood just now, so we must get his voice back and make him continue."

"Even if it weren't so, not being able to speak is absolutely ridiculous to the extreme. We must find a way... If necessary, I think even a slightly violent solution would be fine."

"I agree. Now is not the time to be concerned about image~"

They were all angry on his behalf. Thinking he could not push everything onto the girls for them to shoulder, Haruaki racked his brains. Information, clues. What was Isuzu planning? She wanted to steal other people's voices. Although the purpose was unknown—but wait, that's right. Was anybody's voice okay?

Haruaki tried to enter his idea into his cellphone and placed it on the table.

"Those whose voices were stolen, what did they have in common?' huh... I see, if she could steal anyone she encountered, there should be more victims than what we have now, right?"

"Hmm, we could try thinking from this angle. But the victims to this point include me, then Haruaki..."

Next, Kirika continued and shifted her gaze.

"Then there's the ordinary person the priest mentioned just now. Chief Priest, how is that person now?"

"She immediately recovered consciousness, I think she already left... Her partner said that depending on the situation, if she still can't speak, they will go to the hospital."

"Then we can't meet them... It can't be helped. By the way, what kind of person were they?"

"Yes. Uh... I remember a young woman, accompanied by a man, with long hair... I'm sorry, I didn't take care to memorize the details because I never expected this. Also... Oh right, their clothes were quite fancy, the man also had a leather jacket with a skull emblem..."

Kuroe's eyebrow twitched and she instantly said:

"Were the words 'Go to Hell!!!' written on his back?"

"Hmm... Now that you mention it, I think those English words were written there."

Haruaki recalled something from the depths of his memory. Kuroe was right. They had seen this leather jacket, rather incongruent with the shrine environment, somewhere before. Where had they seen it...?"

"Kono-san, do you still remember? The people who drew o-mikuji fortunes after us."

"Oh, that's right. That seems to match their description. Back then, I was so demoralized, thinking it was too unfair, so I remember it very clearly. I remember that after Fear-san drew her fortune, it was this couple's turn. The woman was very happy about drawing the Devil's Great fortune—"

"...Both Haruaki and I got the Devil's Great Fortune too."

After Fear murmured without paying attention, everyone sitting at the table looked at one another with a sudden realization. After a second's pause, Fear also realized the significance of her comment and kept blinking.

"C-Could it be, that's what's going on?"

"Although it's still unclear, since three out of three victims had drawn the Devil's Great Fortune... It's up for consideration."

"Also—Just before Fear-kun's voice was stolen, that girl said something strange. It bothered me at the time, so I still remember it... She said something like 'everyone's luck is quite good' then proceeded to guess all our o-mikuji results correctly."

Indeed. Haruaki remembered as well. At the time, he was wondering if she had some sort of power to sense o-mikuji results.

"Well then, let's suppose that she possesses 'the ability to sense other people's luck.' Lucky people will draw Great Fortune. People with even better luck will draw an o-mikuji fortune better than Great Fortune... Suppose she selects a target before stealing their voice, then it must be because it's better for her in some way of course, or people with good luck are absolutely required. In other words, she could be seeking the voices of 'lucky' people."

"Yes. She is targeting the voices of people who drew Devil's Great Fortune—Looks like this theory can be established... Well then, what should we do?"

"That's the main point. After all, we have no idea at all about other people's luck. Using the o-mikuji...? No, besides, it's meaningless once she leaves the shrine..."

Just as Konoha murmured these words—

"...That girl won't leave the shrine."

Chihaya spoke up. She was still sitting on the veranda with her back towards Haruaki and the others, playing with her cellphone—but presumably listening to their conversation all along. But currently, it was still unknown whether she was willing to help find Isuzu or not.

"Why?"

"Because I've never taken her on a walk in this area, so she shouldn't be familiar with the surroundings. At most, she only knows the route to school. Besides, that girl appears to be linked strongly to me. She once said that she's unable to get too far away from me."

"I see. In that case, she really will continue to steal voices in this shrine now when there are the most number of people..."

Konoha nodded, seemingly finished organizing her thoughts. Hence, she began to discuss with Kirika and Kuroe, asking the priest whenever they had questions, deciding on their approach for the operation next. To prevent more victims and for the sake of retrieving Haruaki's voice.

Haruaki was very grateful. These girls were really dependable. But he could allow himself to simply rely on them all the time—Haruaki also typed on his cellphone to take part in the dialogue. He asked the priest about the probability of drawing Devil's Great Fortune as well as the layout of the shrine's confines. Gradually, a clearer outline emerged of what they needed to do.

(However... This really resembles human wave tactics. In the end, we still need to wait for Isuzu to act. If anything, I really hope we could have more manpower...)

However, it was necessary to start the operation as soon as possible. While they were still dawdling, Isuzu might strike again. Pointless wishes would not help things at all... Just as Haruaki sighed—

He had been staring at the cellphone screen all along in order to type. At this moment, the phone rang with a text message alert. Haruaki gestured with his eyes to apologize to the group while opening the received message—This was a reply to the message he had sent out last night just after midnight as an invitation to go on the New Year's first shrine visit. One which he had sent to Kirika as well. Haruaki had forgotten about it because there was no response until now—

'Happy New Year~! Because Shiraho fell asleep while watching the Red-White show, so did I~ Really sorry for failing to reply to your invitation for the New Year's first shrine visit! Right now, you guys probably finished and went home to sleep? Although a bit slower, we're planning on visiting a shrine now~! If there's enough time, we might drop by your house to say hi on the way back. Oh right, Shiraho's sleeping face is already adorable normally, but yesterday when I was watching Shiraho sleep while the Red-White show was on television, she looked even more vulnerable than usual, it really made me wanna hug her tight~ But in fact, I did hug her~"

Almost reaching the character limit, the text message was filled with showing off her lover. Haruaki skimmed through it quickly and closed his eyes. Sorry. I'm very sorry. I'm really sorry for doing this right at the beginning of a new year. In fact, let me apologize right here.

Haruaki clapped his hands together towards the cellphone screen to transmit his thoughts of apology. Next, while mentally simulating how he should dodge an exorcism arrow to the eye from the one with the adorable sleeping face (allegedly), he once again opened up the text message screen to key in a short sentence. Then he handed the cellphone over to Konoha who was watching him in puzzlement.

'Sorry, could you help me make a phone call? I'll shoulder all of the consequences.'

Part 2

Rather horrifically, Haruaki's ominous premonition came true.

As soon as the other party caught sight of Haruaki, she held up the exorcism arrow she had brought and stabbed towards his eye without saying a word.

"...!"

"Tsk!"

Fortunately, having simulated the situation before hand, Haruaki barely managed to evade successfully, but it was super scary nonetheless. For the first words spoken in the new year to be the sound of tongue clicking, things were not quite right in various ways.

"S-Shiraho~! That's really dangerous, too dangerous!"

"Indeed, what a dangerous crisis. A lowly human dares to summon us as though we were convenient handymen on call. Since it happens to be New Year's, the timing is perfect, so let's take this opportunity to cut ties with him once and for all, shall we? It is my belief that throwing this human into a grave would not only offer the most meaning in life but also produces a clean cut and conclusion. How absolutely wonderful."

"W-We're very sorry... How should I phrase this? It's because we needed more helpers as quickly as possible and it suddenly occurred to us that your house is close by, Shiraho-san..."

Konoha shrank her shoulders as she spoke. Shiraho remained with arms crossed and clicked her tongue with 100% displeasure. "Ahaha~" Beside them, Sovereignty laughed awkwardly with a stiff expression.

The group was now located inside the shrine's confines, near the o-mikuji fortune drawing box. On the phone, Konoha had already conveyed to Shiraho and Sovereignty the basic situation. Apart from Shiraho and the rest, also present was a shrine maiden in a slightly excessively revealing outfit. When Shiraho and Sovereignty appeared, Chihaya made a surprised look for an instant but resumed playing with her cellphone with an expressionless face.

Since Isuzu could not leave Chihaya too far, everyone hoped that Chihaya could accompany them on their operation no matter what. Hence, after the discussion, they tried asking her to follow them—After several minutes of ignoring their repeated calling out to her, Chihaya finally stood up from the veranda, still remaining silent, but following after them. They originally thought it would be a lot harder to convince her, but Chihaya cooperated more readily than expected. Perhaps she found their incessant hassling annoying so she gave up and went for the path of least resistance; or maybe it was some other reason. It was still unclear at this point.

In any case, Chihaya definitely had no intention of helping Haruaki's group, but one could not assert that she was not going to provide assistance either. Maintaining this sort of subtle attitude, Chihaya stood in the outskirts of the group. Occasionally, she would glance up from her cellphone but always towards Shiraho. However, Shiraho was still displeased and did not notice Chihaya's gaze at all.

"Treating us as helpers simply because we live very close by, that's not something I can possibly accept. Hey, Sovereignty, let us hurry and go home after finishing the homage."

"But Haruaki-kun can't speak, that's a great problem! And if anyone else gets their voice stolen, it'd be terrible. So, Shiraho, umm... I really wanna help everyone..."

"Hoo~" Shiraho sighed greatly.

"Seriously, Sovereignty, you're too kind... You really wish to help?"

"Yes, I do I do!"

"...After all, we're planning on making a shrine visit anyway, let's just think of it as taking a walk within the shrine's confines—What a pain, it can't be helped. If simply taking a stroll while casually looking at the surroundings is enough to make you people owe us a favor for the entire year, it's not like we cannot help."

Shiraho rambled in an indirect manner while she glared viciously at Haruaki's group.

"But let me make myself clear from the start, human. I have no intention of separating from Sovereignty. Neither will I let this child do anything dangerous. Also, I've heard that heavy rain is coming this afternoon so we shall be leaving soon."

"Yes, let's go with that for now. In the first place, your job is just for surveillance. If there's any danger, just escape first and contact us afterwards."

"Very well." Shiraho nodded with an expression completely skeptical of Fear's words. "Let's try our best together~" Only after Sovereignty hugged her tightly did Shiraho's expression begin to relax.

At this moment, Kirika stared intently towards the o-mikuji drawing box and spoke:

"Then let's confirm again what we should be doing next. Isuzu is aiming for people with excellent luck—those who draw the 'Devil's Great Fortune.' Also, assuming Isuzu cannot leave the shrine's surroundings, what we must do is watch over those who drew the Devil's Great Fortune while they remain inside this shrine. Right now, the priest is cordoning off the walking trails leading to the back of the mountain, preventing visitors from going through. In other words, most visitors are basically confined to the interior of the shrine's yard. Conversely, Isuzu has no choice but to enter the shrine's confines on her own initiative. Hence, anyone who's free should

patrol the entrance to the walking trail or the outskirts of the shrine's confines and watch out for Isuzu's intrusion."

"But the range is too broad after all, so patrolling should only be done if you're free. The chances should be best over here—Check out the o-mikuji fortune results and secretly tail anyone who draws the Devil's Great Fortune until they finish their New Year's first shrine visit. It'd be best if the person leaves without incident, but if Isuzu attacks, then contact everyone else to gather. Although I feel bad about using the common people as bait, there's no choice right now."

"The chances of drawing the Devil's Great Fortune... The priest said it's roughly one in twenty. Looks like it isn't that easy to draw. For me, that woman in the couple and Haruaki to draw it all in a row, is it really luck? Or the o-mikuji paper wasn't shuffled thoroughly enough..."

"Whether you draw the one out of twenty because you're lucky or you're considered lucky because you drew something that has a 5% chance, the distinction is difficult to make, like many things... In any case, we can only rely on the o-mikuji results to determine if people might get attacked by Isuzu."

"However, having the entire group on watch in front of the o-mikuji box doesn't help either. Let's minimize the number of us who are checking the o-mikuji results and have the rest patrolling the shrine's confines or boundary. Once we run out of people to tail visitors, then we start phoning for reinforcements."

"Hoo, how troublesome. Honestly speaking, this is absolutely a pain to the extreme..."

"Shiraho, let's do our best even if it's troublesome! This is for the sake of Haruaki-kun's voice!"

"On the contrary, as soon as I imagine how this human could no longer verbally subject you to his sexual harassment, I see nothing bad with this fortuitous development."

I've never done any verbal sexual harassment! Haruaki glared at her in protest but Shiraho did not return his gaze. Simply tapping against her shoulder the exorcism arrow she had brought, Shiraho held Sovereignty's hand and turned around.

"In any case, we will wander randomly within the shrine's confines. Also, we still need to burn the exorcism arrow and toss in the offering money. Then just as a matter of convenience along the way, mustering a shred of motivation that is about to fall asleep, let us be so kind as to perform this joke of a job as patrolling personnel. To think that such a wonderful and troublesome task would be thrust upon us when the new year had barely started, it looks like the coming year will be full of excitement too. When tossing the offering, I definitely wish to the gods: 'May all humans who get in our way suffer a delightfully tragic death instantly.'"

As usual, Shiraho's every sentence was filled with barbs. Having imposed a request on her first thing on New Year's Day, Haruaki could understand her agitation after all.

"Sh-Shiraho, don't drag me around, okay~ A-Anyway, we're going first! We'll do our best!"

"Yes, take care. Sovey-chan, you be careful too~"

Haruaki and the rest half-narrowed their eyes while Kuroe stared blankly as she waved goodbye to Sovereignty and Shiraho. But after walking a few steps, Shiraho suddenly halted. After some apparent deliberation, her shoulders shook slightly and she spoke without looking back:

"Oh... I almost forgot. I seriously have absolutely no intention of performing this patrolling task earnestly, but simply out of a matter of curiosity, let me ask this. In other words—Uh... The one who stole the foolish human's voice, the commendable person deserving of great praise, what does she look like? I really must offer my thanks when I see her."

Haruaki and company exchanged glances. Speaking of which, they had not told her what Isuzu looked like. Then they smiled lightly. Despite Shiraho's usual display of her twisted personality, she was apparently willing to offer her assistance to some extent. It looked like this year's Shiraho was still the same. Just as the group conversed using exchanged gazes...

"...What's going on? Despite being so pretty, did she catch some sort of disease where she can't speak without mocking or insulting others? What a shame... Anyway, let me record this."

Chihaya, who simply kept sneaking glances at Shiraho, typed on her cellphone while feeling apprehensive about the sense of dissonance between her extraordinary appearance and troublesome personality.

Konoha tiptoed behind shrine visitors to peek at their drawn fortunes. Then looking back at the group, she nodded and disappeared into the crowd, following the visitor.

Kuroe and Kirika remained on standby before the o-mikuji box. After leaving the instructions "Contact us immediately when the next Devil's Great Fortune appears," Haruaki's group began to move out, consisting of the trio of Fear and the two, Haruaki and Chihaya, who could not play combat roles in crisis situations.

While making a circuit of the shrine's outskirts in search of Isuzu, they also confirmed that the path towards the back of the mountain had been sealed off as planned. Cordoned off simply with a rope, anyone could easily pass through just by stepping over it, but this should be effective in restraining the ordinary populace. Next, they returned to the shrine's confines and as the sun continued to rise, they wandered along the visiting road and around the main hall where crowds were increasing. Every time they caught sight of a figure dressed in shrine maiden clothes, they would jump in surprise but of course, they all turned out to be part-timer shrine maidens.

"Hmm~ It's getting more and more crowded. Business looks like it's thriving."

"...Really? Probably just for today. To go so far as to make weird o-mikuji fortunes to attract visitors, that's so desperate it's laughable."

Chihaya played with her cellphone in boredom as she answered. Her gaze was essentially glued to the phone. Occasionally, she would glare viciously at lecherous male shrine visitors who were leering at her shrine maiden outfit. To be honest, Haruaki was wondering. If she did not want to be stared at, shouldn't she simply wear a normal outfit? But speaking of which, judging by the way she spoke, Chihaya did not seem concerned at all about the shrine's work. Haruaki even got the feeling that she did not actually need to wear a shrine maiden outfit on purpose—Yet in actual fact, she was practicing a dance. Did that mean her inner thoughts were completely opposite?

"This is clearly your home's affairs. Trying hard shouldn't be a bad thing, right?"

"...None of your business. Before talking rubbish, let's find Isuzu first. Keep your nose out of my affairs."

"Hmph. Searching is the job of the eyes. It's got nothing to do with the mouth. The way you keep playing with your phone, I'm surprised you don't tire of it. Are you texting your friends?"

"I'm not sending texts, just browsing web pages or doing other stuff."

"Muu~ I don't quite get it but I guess that means you don't have friends to text. How pitiful."

Fear muttered rudely but Chihaya was completely unfazed.

"Yes, it's true that I don't have friends to text. On the other hand, simply counting, I do have a couple people as contacts... But they were pretty much recorded due to favors. Also, I've no interest in texting anyway."

"Why? Isn't exchanging texts quite fun? Hmm, though I've only heard that from Kana and Taizou—in other words, my friends."

"Hoo~" Chihaya exhaled against her cellphone screen.

"—That's because I'm very busy. Before playing with others or sending meaningless texts, I have many other things I need to do. More than enough to fill my time."

Things she needed to do, what exactly were they? The work of a curse expert? Or other things? Haruaki glanced at Chihaya but could not garner any clues from the profile of her bored face.

Perhaps bothered by Chihaya's sigh, Fear looked at her in puzzlement. At this moment, Chihaya's gaze finally left her cellphone and she looked Fear in the eye.

"Say... I don't really care, but didn't you say that searching is the job of the eyes?"

"Muu. I-I just happen to be searching the area behind you, not like I'm looking at you—Okay, let's look at the opposite side next. Haruaki, let's go, don't get separated."

Saying that, Fear squeezed into the crowd again and advanced forward. Since Haruaki could not speak, getting separated would be problematic. Now our positions have reversed—Haruaki recalled the situation a couple hours earlier as he started chasing after Fear's silver hair. Still scowling, Chihaya also followed.

Searching, searching nonstop. Searching for the girl in the shrine maiden outfit. Searching for a cursed bell. Along the way, the cellphone rang, hence they returned to the o-mikuji box to watch over a family whose leader was a man who had drawn the Devil's Great Fortune. After finishing their shrine visit and buying many talismans, the family immediately left. Throughout the process, Haruaki occasionally ran into Konoha and Kirika who were following others with serious expressions, or, when passing by Shiraho, she would silently kick Haruaki in the shins and continue searching the surroundings—This continued for several hours.

Then the situation grew increasingly strange. Literally, this not only applied to the sky but also the condition of Haruaki's group.

"What... A vendor fainted...? His voice really... Hmm..."

Picking up the phone in Haruaki's place, Fear groaned. Konoha had reported the appearance of a new victim. As a vendor, it would not be surprising for him to have stayed inside the shrine's confines after drawing the Devil's Great Fortune. What a disaster. This meant that they needed to take precautions for this side of possibilities as well. Just as they started to raise their guard—

'Sorry, she took advantage of the crowd and using an unseen opening... Another victim!'

'Reporting~ Another person has drawn the Devil's Great Fortune~ Wow, two in a row! Anyone free right now?'

'Human, the current situation seems to be getting out of hand. Fufu, how delightful. Oh right, just purely by chance, I've currently discovered someone fainted in front of me. This is pure coincidence, just when I was casually resuming my stroll... Hey, Sovereignty...! H-Haruaki-kun, Fear-chan, sorry! Even though we were watching over someone who had drawn the Devil's Great Fortune, he still got attacked! I think I caught a vague glimpse of someone dressed as a shrine maiden, but she immediately disappeared! Sorry!'

"She appeared at you and Shiraho's location? But we've received sightings over here as well, about a girl in a shrine maiden's outfit... These are basically opposite directions of the shrine, how does she move?"

The facts were quite complicated. The cellphone kept ringing. Isuzu's attacks could not be stopped. Not only that, quite a few number of new victims arose.

"Damn it...!"

Fear bit her lower lip hard, glaring severely at her surroundings. Naturally, Haruaki was doing the same. Despite monitoring so vigilantly, why could they not stop Isuzu from striking? How many more people's voices was Isuzu going to steal until she was willing to stop? Haruaki's mind kept churning over these questions without answers. However, all they could do right now was keep searching. Haruaki and Fear continued on their way again.

"..."

Chihaya's gaze was still glued to her cellphone screen.

But it was different from earlier.

Currently, her fingers made key presses absentmindedly on occasion as though only when she suddenly remembered.

After that, a few more hours passed. Noon went by but still the search remained fruitless. The number of victims had already reached ten. The sky was also filling up with thick layers of clouds and could rain at any moment.

Although Isuzu needed to be caught as quickly as possible, Haruaki's group was tired to their limits by all the mindless searching. They had no choice but to take turns to rest and eat at Chihaya's house.

After quickly eating some roasted corn and New Year rice cakes that were bought at the shrine vendors, Haruaki and Fear caught their breath. Seeing Fear was about to rush out again, Haruaki typed on his cellphone:

'Wait up. Let's rest a little more.'

"I don't think now is the time to be casually saying something like that. But whatever. Me aside, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One and you must be tired from running all over the place. Let's rest for another ten... no, five minutes."

"..."

Due to moving as a group, Chihaya naturally took a break together with them. She did not reach for the snacks but simply sat down, immersed in her cellphone. At this moment, footsteps were heard coming from the

veranda. Since the paper sliding door was already broken, they could easily see who was coming. It was the priest—Chihaya's father.

"Chief Priest? Thank you for letting us rest here."

"No no, I haven't been able to offer you proper hospitality either... However, the situation has become very serious."

"Yeah—But don't you worry, I'll surely find her immediately! During this time, please find a way to cover it up and prevent panic."

"Yeah." The priest nodded vaguely. Chihaya clicked her tongue, the corners of her lips twisting in mockery:

"That's right, that's right. Just cover things up to maintain the shrine's reputation. Business sure is tough."

"Chihaya..."

The priest frowned and looked at his daughter with a pained expression. Chihaya continued to jeer:

"What's with that look? Any objections? Oh right, of course you do. Because this is all my fault. Blame me for becoming the owner of a weird bell. It's all because of your unworthy daughter that the all-important shrine is facing a great crisis. You must be very troubled."

"The shrine... is indeed... important. But... No, that's not right. Chihaya, you..."

Chihaya interrupted the priest with a harsher tone of voice. Faced with this sudden, tense, father-daughter conversation that they could not butt in, Haruaki and Fear could only sit uncomfortably, hunching their necks.

"Look, there you go again. That's right, the shrine is very important! The shrine, the shrine! As long as it's for protecting the shrine, you're willing to do anything, right? Under the blessing of the gods, you even made a whole bunch of innovative o-mikuji fortunes. Ha! What Devil's Great Fortune, how inane. In the end, it's all just business."

"Chihaya!"

"What? Are you asking me to act a little more like a shrine family's daughter again? Now that is the most inane! Rather, you should be the one to shape up. Clearly you've never even gone to visit mom!"

"..."

Haruaki recalled what the priest had mentioned. A poor father-daughter relationship. A hospitalized mother. For them, this kind of argument was probably commonplace. But Haruaki felt that he could not just silently watch them argue. Despite being an unrelated outsider, it was probably time to advise them to stop—Just as Haruaki thought that...

Fear, who had been watching Chihaya and her father then turning to Haruaki, suddenly frowned. In the next instant, she widened her eyes and reached into her pocket. At the same time, Haruaki also caught sight of something.

A hand.

The priest was standing in the veranda, arguing with Chihaya in the living room. Beside him, a hand reached out.

That hand's owner, quietly walking on the veranda, silently approaching the priest was—

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two!"

The other side remained silent while approaching from the side of the veranda. Looking out from inside the living room, only her front half could be seen. Still smiling serenely as usual, Isuzu reached out and grabbed the priest's collar, pulling him towards her, then embraced him. Just as he started struggling, like a vampire, she brought her lips near the priest's neck—

"I-Isuzu... S-Stop it..."

Did Chihaya's voice reach her ears? In the end, nothing was prevented. Smooch. A light kiss was heard. After a certain something was stolen from his neck, the priest's body shook violently then went limp and collapsed on the floor.

At the same time, Fear threw the torture wheel but Isuzu had already retreated. The torture wheel struck the thick pillar that stood between the living room and the veranda. Clicking her tongue, Fear pulled the wheel back and rushed out to the veranda. However, her vicious glare, passing back and forth over the garden and the forest behind, indicated she had lost signs of the enemy. Fear probably did not rush recklessly into the forest because she did not want to leave three powerless humans behind.

Haruaki frantically ran towards the collapsed priest. With simply a fearful expression, Chihaya was rooted to the spot in shock, gazing down at the priest's face.

People who had their voices stolen would faint from the shock but regained consciousness soon after. Haruaki had personally experienced the same himself. As expected, it did not take long for the priest to wake up and open his eyes. Sitting up, he touched his own throat with a troubled expression. Sure enough—his voice was stolen.

"Damn it, she escaped...! But as it so happens, Cow Tits, who's good at sensing people's presences, isn't here. What a useless girl!"

Fear grumbled impatiently and returned to the living room. Seeing that the priest wanted to say something, Haruaki handed a notebook and pen nearby to him.

'Sorry. Speaking of which, when I tried drawing an o-mikuji as a test, I also got the Devil's Great Fortune.'

"You should have said so earlier...!"

'I failed to find the chance each time, I'm really sorry.'

"But—Even if we knew beforehand, it's still shocking. I never expected that she would even steal the voice of her owner's family. Damn that girl, she really has no scruples...!"

Fear groaned while glancing at Chihaya. She was gripping her cellphone tightly with an expression of disbelief, casting her gaze at her feet helplessly, whispering softly:

"What... How did things come to this? This... I never asked her to do this kind of thing... Why on earth is she doing this...!?"

The priest was watching Chihaya with complicated emotions in his eyes. Soon after, he finally started to write slowly in the notebook.

'This isn't your fault, Chihaya.'

"...! Th-That's obvious. It's not like I feel guilty or I'm worried about you—!"

Watching Chihaya in her emotional state, the priest continued to write.

'Yes. After all, it's just the loss of my voice and doesn't hurt either. So there's no need to worry.'

"I already said I'm not worried about you! N-Not having to hear your lifeless voice makes things easier for me too. Besides, your job only involves casually watching the shrine maidens at work or sweeping the shrine's confines. Even unable to speak, umm... There won't be any problem—"

Chihaya spoke rudely to her father repeatedly. But it sounded like she was using her feelings of annoyance and impatience to suppress other thoughts in her mind.

'Perhaps so. However, it's not completely without problems. For the tasks at hand, I think it's okay even if I don't speak, but...'

"W-What? Are there other problems? A person like you... Your voice—"

Probably needing more space to write, the priest flipped over to the next blank page. He looked very cautious as he wrote down word after word.

Amidst the silence, only the rustling of the pen writing words could be heard. As the sound of writing stopped, pure silence elapsed for a few seconds. During this time, the priest seemed to be hesitating, deliberating over something as he gazed at the words he had written.

But after a while, he made an extremely lonely smile and held up the paper—

'However, what troubles me greatly is the one fact that I can't phone your mother.'

Chihaya was frozen, apparently stunned as she stared at those words.

"Phone...? You've been... calling her...?"

'Basically every day. Because it's embarrassing, I always call her when you're not around.'

The priest closed his eyes briefly then wrote again.

'You may see me as just a father who's always busy running the shrine and completely neglecting the family. But I can proudly say that I have always cherished my family. Your mother once said that she loves this shrine. That's why I must protect it well. Not only because of financial matters like the cost of hospitalization but also to protect your mother's home. That's why I am desperately trying to make this shrine prosper.'

Only having confirmed that Chihaya had finished reading these words did the priest flip to the next page. But before he wrote down the next sentences, the priest paused for a few seconds. As though saying 'what am I doing, explaining myself this late,' he was smiling wryly in slight embarrassment.

'You are the first child born to your mother and I in our advanced age, so there are many things that I don't know what kind of distance to maintain. Sorry, your father is so awkward.'

"Wha..."

'How unbelievable. I never thought that such words could be expressed so easily once transformed into written text. However, no matter how hard it is speak, these words should be voiced aloud. I really wish I could have told you earlier. Perhaps it's already too late.'

Yes, truly. This was perhaps exceedingly pure and simple. Maybe quite commonplace—Haruaki wondered, mesmerized.

An awkward father and a rebellious daughter. A hospitalized mother. Misunderstandings born from minor differences of opinion. Currently, right here was a perfectly ordinary story. Like gears unable to mesh or turn due to an insignificant foreign object getting caught between them. But similarly, perhaps through some kind of chance impetus, they could turn again. If the gears themselves could notice how trivial the foreign object was, perhaps they could recover and turn even faster.

—However, currently, it looked like they still could not turn yet.

Chihaya originally displayed a stunned expression, but most probably subconsciously, she made an expressionless face and turned her back to her father.

"What, saying this at this point. It has nothing to do with me... Really, it's got nothing to do with me..."

"H-Hey, is this really okay?"

"What is really okay? It's just being unable to speak. There's no hindrance otherwise. That's totally nothing to be concerned about. By the way, you only said we're resting for five minutes. Five minutes have already passed."

Chihaya walked quickly over to the entryway. The priest watched her leave and said: 'Don't worry about me. Please bear with Chihaya.' Haruaki and Fear exchanged glances and chased after her. After all, they could report to Konoha the current situation any time they wanted, and even if they left the priest behind, Kuroe and others would arrive for the next round of breaks—But if they lost Chihaya, things would get very troublesome instead.

Haruaki and Fear caught up to Chihaya at the entryway. Haruaki originally wanted to say to her from behind: 'Hey, you really should talk more with your father, okay?' but he could not speak. Arghh, what a pain. Just as he took out his cellphone—

"Hey, let me tell you guys, I suddenly have something I need to do. Since this is a rare chance, accompany me."

"What? We have no time now, we must catch Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two as quickly as possible! As if we had time to accompany you to do stuff—"

Without answering Fear, Chihaya simply stared ahead—Rather than into the yard, this direction was towards the forest in the back of the mountain that extended from the home's surroundings.

"This is related to your urgent matter too. Because I'm already tired of it. I want to end this meaningless commotion as quickly as possible. Also, it's making me mad, watching an idiot write sluggishly because he doesn't know how to type on a cellphone. What an extreme eyesore. Similarly, talking by writing is even more of an eyesore..."

Chihaya spoke on her own while walking towards the depths of the forest. Related to Haruaki and company's urgent matter. In that case, she meant it was related to the matter of catching Isuzu? Then there was no choice but to follow.

"Could it be that she actually knows where that girl is...? Whatever, Haruaki, let's go in any case!"

Chasing after Chihaya who did not even look back once, Haruaki and Fear also entered the forest. Just as they realized this path seemed quite familiar, they soon reached the shrine in front of the pond. Without any looking around needed, it was clear that there were no signs of Isuzu at this wide open space.

"So..."

Chihaya sat down at once in front of the shrine, then began to tap away on her cellphone.

"Hey, what do you need to do here? That girl isn't here at all, right? Or you plan on calling her here by phone?"

"How could that be possible? It's not like she has a cellphone. This is simply for killing time. Also, coming here has no special meaning. As long as there's no other people, anywhere's fine."

"I don't get what you're talking about. Explain clearer!"

"Sigh~" Chihaya sighed.

"It can't be helped. I guess I haven't told you yet—Isuzu's curse not only makes my voice like this but also has another effect. You've see it, right? A shrine maiden's dance. I have to dance several times a day. Even if I don't wanna, I must dance. Get it? The reason why I'm dancing in the mornings is neither for this shrine nor an interest in Shintoism."

"What, that's a curse? Seeing you pour water on yourself and dancing early in the morning, to think I was impressed by you... Say, why didn't you mention this until now?"

"Nothing much, I simply thought that I didn't need to deliberately fill in this explanation. Besides, I don't want you to force me to do what's coming next. Although I also hate taking initiative myself, since the situation is such a mess, there's no choice either."

What's coming next? Haruaki and Fear both tilted their heads in puzzlement. As though mocking them for understanding too slowly, Chihaya scoffed.

"Normally, I dance at sunrise or sunset, but occasionally, the impulse to dance also strikes during the day... Like now. Also, you must have heard Isuzu mentioned, right? If I suppress the urge to dance, Isuzu can sense it, apparently. So if I just keep suppressing it, she might start thinking 'Did something happen?' and at least come here to check it out?"

"What!? Really!? In that case, perhaps—No wait, will she know where you are?"

"I've already told you, her connection to the owner is very strong, to the point that she can't leave the shrine's exterior, nor can she stay too far away from me. Since she can tell if I am suppressing the dance impulse, of course she's able to know where her master is."

Chihaya spoke simply. Indeed, in that case, it was very likely for Isuzu to show up here. Under the current conditions where it seemed impossible to prevent further victims from appearing one after another, perhaps Haruaki and Fear had no choice but to participate in Chihaya's plan. As much as Haruaki and Fear thought: "If only you'd told us sooner?", saying it was useless by this point. There must be some reason why Chihaya was willing to assist them despite such great reluctance. Because Haruaki and Fear could vaguely sense an insignificant reason that Chihaya would never admit herself.

"Nunuu... I see, so that's how it is. Then we just need to wait a while here. However, given this rare chance to draw her here, we can't let her escape again. Although I am confident that I can easily catch her on my own, it's better to be safe. Haruaki, dial the number for Cow Tits and the others and hand the phone to me. I'll call them over."

It would probably take some time to gather the girls who were scattered all over various locations of the shrine, but Fear was right. Haruaki dialed the numbers for Konoha and others then handed the phone to Fear to explain the situation.

After contacting Konoha and the rest, all there was left to do was wait. Haruaki sat together with Chihaya before the shrine, waiting for the moment to arrive. On the other hand, Fear kept staring at the surrounding forest without lowering her guard.

However—Haruaki forgot to ask Chihaya something.

Dancing was a curse. Then if she suppressed the urge to dance, what consequences were there...?

"Gah..."

Without warning, Chihaya's cellphone fell to the ground from her hand. Only then was Haruaki finally aware of the dangers of enduring a curse. Fear continued to watch the surroundings vigilantly and did not notice Chihaya's abnormal state. Haruaki frantically typed on the cellphone:

'If you suppress your dancing, what will happen?'

"This... Who knows... Hmm... However, it's probably bad for health. I've heard... Depending on the level of the curse... The body simply feels uncomfortable... or goes mad... or—death..."

Even speaking seemed to be difficult. Chihaya picked up her cellphone with trembling hands and placed it in her shoulder bag. Then using both arms, she hugged her knees tightly.

"Hmm... H-Hey, what's the matter? Is this because you're enduring the curse?"

Fear finally noticed Chihaya's condition but Chihaya apparently did not even have the excess strength to answer her.

"Huff... Ha, ah... Kuu, nnn..."

Rubbing her glasses against her knees, Chihaya kept suppressing the impulse. Large beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Her breathing became irregular, mixed with occasional moans of pain. This was looking quite bad, right? Haruaki had no idea how much further she had to endure until Isuzu showed up. Was there anything he could do—?

Just as Haruaki was at a loss what to do, Chihaya's shoulders suddenly shook violently. Under her shoulder where her t-shirt was curled up, her arm slowly rose. Her slender arm revealed the pale armpit beneath as it rose straight up. However—

"Gah..."

Chihaya used her other hand to grab the rising arm. It was as though her body was moving on its own against her will. No, in actual fact, that was exactly what was happening. Even the hand that had grabbed her arm was forced to separate and rise slowly. Not only that, even her waist was starting to tremble, trying to make her stand up.

"Idiot... What are... you looking at... Hurry and help... stop me!"

"...!"

Even answering "I understand!" was impossible. Haruaki frantically caught both her arms but her legs managed to stand up. If he were to release her arms, she would probably start dancing elegantly with swaying moves instantly.

"Ooh... Ooooooh... Ahhh, jeez... It can't be helped... Great pervert...! But there's only you here... No other choice either! Try harder... to stop me! Do whatever it takes... I allow you only now!"

Chihaya's eyes glared at Haruaki but immediately gave off a hazy glint like a delirious fever patient, then suddenly she regained consciousness with a start. While repeating this nonstop, she kept hyperventilating. She could also be seen drooling slightly. From this, one could see that she was really desperate.

"What are you doing... Hurry... Hurry up! Are you trying to make all past efforts go to waste!?"

Of course not. Whether Haruaki's own voice, the priest's voice, or the other victims' voices, all could only get resolved after catching Isuzu. Everything could only be resolved by drawing her here.

No choice but to go ahead. Haruaki forcibly hugged Chihaya's body, forcing his arms around her shoulders and back, pressing himself tightly against her to restrain her movements.

"Mmmmmm... Huff... Hah, ah—Th-That's right. This... works. You can do it... as long as you will yourself... Great pervert. But afterwards... I'm gonna kill you..."

"Woah~! D-D-Damn shameless brat! You finally decided to make use of this excellent opportunity to satisfy your perverted desires!? U-Unacceptable, this is unacceptable! If that girl needs to be restrained, leave it to me! Switch with me!"



Fear kept smacking her palm against Haruaki's head, but—

"I-Idiot... If you restrain me in his place, once Isuzu arrives, there's no one to take care of her...!"

"T-True, but still!"

"Stop talking about this... You just... watch the surroundings... properly..."

It looked like Fear temporarily agreed with Chihaya. After a final smack against his back, Haruaki felt Fear's presence gradually moving away. She was probably checking out the surroundings in preparation for Isuzu's arrival any moment now.

Hurry and come—Haruaki could not help but think that. He considered the current situation rather dire. Enduring a curse was definitely not good for one's health. He would not be surprised if anything happened. If any signs that it would be dangerous should this continued, he would immediately let go—Haruaki secretly made this decision.

"Hoo... No... Ah, hah... Nnn..."

Through his entire body, Haruaki could feel the girl's body trembling. He could feel the tangible existence of the girl who was dressed in the shrine maiden outfit exposing her thighs and the t-shirt that did not match the winter season. Through the thin fabric, he could also feel a certain bulging sensation. Hot breath was blowing by his ear. Chihaya was clinging tightly to Haruaki's body, desperately suppressing her own movements. Not only her upper body but even her legs entangled him, pressing her hips close to him.

(Guh, oh...!)

To be honest, Haruaki was mustering all his strength. The power compelling Chihaya to dance was far stronger than expected, so there was no way he could relax his arms the slightest. At the same time, he had to judge when she had reached a critical point while trying not to be aware of her body that was intimately pressed against him. His mind was total chaos.

"H-Hyaah... Ahh... No good... Ah... Nnn... No good... Ahhhh—!"

Losing track of time, Haruaki could feel her body shake especially intensely. Her eyes completely lost focus. No good. She could endure no

longer. Although Isuzu had yet to appear, Chihaya's life and safety was irreplaceable—!

Haruaki suddenly released her from his embrace. Chihaya's body simply swayed for an instant, then she instantly stood up as if someone had straightened her back. Liberated, her arms were raised up while she stood upright and steadied her stance.

"Ahhh... Enough... It's okay. I'll... start dancing..."

After blinking a few times, Chihaya's eyes finally started to regain focus, then she murmured softly. Swaying her hakama, she began to dance unsteadily. This could not be helped, Haruaki thought. But in the next instant, he realized.

Chihaya did not say that because the plan had failed.

"Oh dear~ Isuzu was thinking there was an abnormal emergency and rushed over for a look. So it turns out to be this~"

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two, you've finally appeared!"

Haruaki turned his head to look back, only to see Fear take out her Rubik's cube and standing before her eyes was the cursed bell, dressed as a shrine maiden.

But not only that—

"How troubling... Looks like we barely managed to make it."

"Apparently so. Looks like this absolutely ridiculous New Year's first shrine visit can finally come to a close."

"However, this timing really is just right. Looks like our hearts and souls are truly connected~"

"Yes~♪"

"Don't go 'yes~'! Sovereignty! We only came here to have a look at the commendable girl who stole the voice of the human with the worst nature, that's all—She's the one? Well then, now that we've seen her, I'm satisfied. Let's go home."

Konoha and the others emerged successively from the surrounding forest. Perhaps because everyone was gathering from a different direction, they

naturally encircled the shrine completely—in other words, Isuzu was surrounded.

Everything was going as planned, perhaps even more smoothly than expected. Isuzu had nowhere to escape.

But Isuzu remained smiling as though completely unconcerned by the heavy blockade, simply turning her gaze across Fear and the others. Seeing her so calm and composed, Haruaki frowned. What was going on? How could she remain so calm in the face of this situation—?

In the next instant, Haruaki found the answer. A completely unexpected and utterly baffling—

Yet at the same time—

A perfectly reasonable answer as to how she had been able to commit her crimes so elusively.

"Is this what would be called a trap~? But ultimately, Chihaya-sama cannot be abandoned and left behind in this predicament, how truly troubling~ Hence, our entire team has gathered."

Rustling noises could be heard from the vegetation.

As their gazes were drawn in that direction—Haruaki's entire group was rendered speechless.

Between trees, amidst thickets, on branches, the girls were standing there. All smiling serenely as they gazed at Haruaki's group.

Before their eyes were fourteen shrine maidens who looked identical to Isuzu.

"Wha—!?"

Incomprehensible. What was going on? What happened?

"Oh—Right. Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Isuzu only realized now~ Because Chihaya-sama didn't really question my true form, Isuzu accidentally forgot to clarify~ To be precise, we—Isuzu—are not actually 'a cursed bell'~"

Standing in the center of Haruaki's group, Isuzu spoke while giggling lightly. The other fourteen Isuzus also giggled in the same manner, using a voice that sounded like the ringing of bells.

"We—Isuzu—are actually a set of cursed kagura dance bells."^[11]

Chapter 4 - Did the Voice Transmit Successfully? / "...(No answer)"

Part 1

Fear frowned in puzzlement and murmured softly:

"W-What's the difference? Not a bell but kagura dance bells...?"

"Perhaps you've never seen them before, but kagura bells are not like the bells you see hanging over offering boxes at shrines. Instead, it's a type of tool used during the ritual dances that shrine maidens perform. It looks like a short staff with long, colorful ribbons at the bottom while the bells are strung together in a ring shape on top. I remember they're divided into three tiers with seven in the lowest, five in the middle tier ring and three bells on the top. That's why the instrument is also called the seven-five-three bells."

After Konoha whispered an explanation while glaring sharply, Isuzu nodded happily.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, thank you very much for the explanation~ In other words, a set of kagura bells consists of fifteen bells. Hence, you can call us a collective of fifteen bells. Only Isuzu appeared until now because 'Isuzu' sounds the most natural as a name~ But anyway, let's all say hi to everyone~"

Isuzu looked towards the surrounding shrine maidens—in other words, the beings who looked identical to her. In order, they lowered their heads politely and bowed.

"Hisuzu here." "Nisuzu here." "Misuzu here." "Yosuzu here." "Musuzu here." "Nasuzu here." "Yasuzu here." "Kusuzu here." "Tosuzu here." "Toohisuzu here." "Toonisuzu here." "Toomisuzu here." "Tooyosuzu here." "Tooisuzu here."^[12]

All with identical faces, the girls introduced their names one by one. But even after introductions, it was still impossible to tell them apart. This was Haruaki's first time to encounter this type of humanoid form, existing as one person and fifteen people simultaneously.

"To think something like this is possible... If the Lab Chief's Nation were to learn of this Wathe, they'd happily classify it as a research subject for sure.

No, perhaps there might be precedents, only not to my knowledge—Anyway, I finally understand why you were still able to steal Yachi's voice while under our supervision. It also explains why you were able to steal voices from people on opposite ends of the shrine's confines within short time. So it turns out there are multiples of the same culprit!"

"Yes~ While at the living room, Isuzu took an opportunity when everyone was not paying attention to secretly throw the bells out of the paper sliding door~"

"Because Nisuzu had not found any clothes at the time~ Her appearance was not very presentable back then, please excuse her for that~"

One of the shrine maidens was bowing her head and apologizing towards Haruaki. She was probably the one who had stolen his voice back then, although Haruaki had no idea how their identities should be defined by this point.

"W-Why did you keep me in the dark all this time!? This kind of thing... You never... mentioned a single word to me...!"

Chihaya groaned while dancing slowly. The fifteen shrine maidens all focused their gazes on her.

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Chihaya-sama, because you said that you were not very interested in our true form. Also, starting from the moment Chihaya-sama became our owner, it would be pointless even if explained~"

"Pointless... What do you mean by that?"

"Yes~ Then let's talk a little about the past. We were originally a set of kagura bells used in a shrine of a certain small village. That era was completely unlike modern times. People lived in self-sufficiency and all fruits of the land were used directly to support their livelihoods~"

"But one day, the village was hit by a severe drought. All crops dried up and if it continued, all the villagers would face starvation. Hence, the shrine maiden of the shrine began to dance in order to let the gods listen to her prayers~"

"Every day, every day, she danced continuously for many hours, continuing to dance even after collapsing, continuing to dance even after

waking up. Even when her limbs were stiff and tired, even to the point of spitting blood, she continued to dance~ But the drought still persisted~"

"However, at some point, the shrine maiden began to wonder: even though I am praying so hard, why do the gods not hear my wish? At least let a bit of rain descend. So much suffering, so much contempt. Even so, she still had no choice but to continue dancing, but for what? So much suffering—Hence, a curse was born."

"Meanwhile, the villagers were wondering: Clearly she is trying so hard to dance, but why doesn't it rain? It must be the shrine maiden's lack of ability. How useless, hurry up and make the heavens rain—Hence a curse was born."

Coming from identical faces, identical voices composed a single story together.

"Even so, rain still did not fall from the sky."

"Waved relentlessly, the kagura bells were worn down imperceptibly, eventually becoming unable to make a sound. However, under the villagers' pressure, the shrine maiden had no choice but to continue dancing. In the end—"

"She died. While cursing all creation, she died."

"After the shrine maiden died, it finally rained. However, it was a heavy rainstorm. As though bringing about the wrath of gods, a grand downpour that violently devoured all the farmland and washed everything away."

"In the end, the village was washed away. Any villagers who happened to survive the rain died from starvation. While cursing all creation, they died. Hence, the village died."

End of story. An ending without salvation, leaving behind nothing but a curse.

"Sniff sniff... What a sad story."

Sovereignty frowned and whispered while Konoha narrowed her eyes as though in mourning.

"This has happened before, after all, I once lived through that kind of era. In other words, you are the kagura bells that belonged to that shrine maiden?"

"Yes~ Although many other things happened afterwards... But in any case, we are the «Silent Kagura Bells». However, once someone gains ownership, we can receive half of that shrine maiden's 'voice,' allowing one of us to make a sound and barely speak~"

"I see~ So that's the meaning behind her voice becoming hoarse. One of the bells is then able to speak."

"For us, a person's 'voice' is power. In order to pray to the gods, this is necessary power. Hence, without the ability to speak—without 'voices,' even if more of us apart from Isuzu appeared, we would still be unable to help Chihaya-sama. Neither could we chant the Great Purification Norito Prayer. Hence, until now, Isuzu served our master by herself~"

However, the bells apart from Isuzu, the bells that were originally unable to speak, were all currently talking. In other words—

"Really...!? You girls not only stole that Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One's voice, but also the 'voices' of Haruaki and other unrelated people to use as your own!? So that's why you're all able to speak now, right!?"

"Yes~ When unable to speak, we have no power except for the ability to take other people's voices through bodily contact. But under those conditions, faced with targets who are not connected to us through the bonds of ownership, we are unable to simply take 'roughly half' of a voice. There is no choice but to take all sound to convert into our own~"

"What selfish thieves of voices... Although it no longer matters at this point, what's the reason for targeting people who drew the Devil's Great Fortune?"

"Of course~ Since we want power for helping Chihaya-sama, we need voices that have more power than others. Compared to unlucky people, fortunate people's voices carry more power after all, right~?"

So that was what happened? They had lost their voices. To them, voices were equivalent to power. That was why they stole other people's voices, intending to convert them into their own power—Haruaki finally understood their goal. Including himself, the current victims numbered a few more than ten. A perfect match.

However, he still had certain doubts. Kirika asked them in Haruaki's place:

"However—Why did you wait until now? To this date, you only needed one person's voice, right? Why did you start wanting to obtain more power only after New Year's?"

"That's right, Isuzu, I know you're gathering power for my sake. But haven't we been slowly accumulating power? I already agreed to it and I'm helping you. That's why I'm wearing this kind of shrine maiden outfit and working as a curse expert!"

Chihaya yelled as she swayed in her dance. Haruaki suddenly realized. Indeed—Everything started with them trying dissuade Chihaya from working as a "curse expert."

After Chihaya finished, Isuzu nodded lightly.

"Yes~ In a different sense compared to the 'voices' of bells, to us who have obtained human form due to a curse—"curses" are a kind of power. Hence, we are collecting negative emotions as much as possible. By asking Chihaya-sama to curse people on other's behalf, or to perform witching hour imprecations using Isuzu's hair as a medium, or having Chihaya-sama deliberately wear a lecherous and indecent outfit to make it easier for her to feel displeasure or hatred towards others—All this was for the sake of our power. Regarding this, we are very grateful to Chihaya-sama. Naturally, we hope that she can continue with it as well~"

Indeed, it was understandable. The more a cursed tool was cursed, the more power it could bring out. This was only natural. However, Haruaki had not expected that they would ask Chihaya to do these things deliberately. Clearly to them who were cursed, curses should be something to avoid.

The same went for Chihaya. To think she would wear that kind of t-shirt and thigh-exposing shrine maiden outfit. In a certain sense, she was trying to give herself a bad mood to exude negative thoughts—What on earth was she thinking? Chihaya had viciously scolded Haruaki before: "No looking!" "Great pervert!" But actually, this scolding behavior was exactly her goal. What unbridled unruliness.

"Since that's the case, why exactly...!?"

"Because we believe that simply gathering the power of curses is still not enough, Chihaya-sama. Time is of the essence right now, there is no longer time to take things slowly. In order to fulfill Chihaya-sama's precious wish, we have no choice but to do this. For us who were cursed because a

wish that should have been transmitted failed to reach the gods, our greatest hope to is to fulfill the owner's wish~ This time, precisely because we have fallen to become this kind of existence—that's why we believe we must devote our utmost to fulfilling our role as kagura bells, in other words, to transmit the shrine maiden's wish to the gods~"

Fear exhaled. While turning the Rubik's cube in one hand, she took a step forward. Next, she glared sharply at Isuzu ahead.

"I see—Although there are things I still don't understand, in any case, right now, you're just trying to fulfill your unfinished responsibilities from the past? Hmph, I can't help but say this—You are completely wrong."

"Is that so~? If everyone cannot understand, then it is truly a shame~"

"Say whatever you want. Putting your situation aside, what we need to do still hasn't changed. Are you still unwilling to hand over Haruaki and the other's voices obediently?"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, we have no intention of doing that~ Because these 'voices' are necessary. As our 'voices' and also our 'power'~ Machinery can be used in agriculture in recent times and it looks a lot easier, but if there's no fuel when a harvest is needed, it would be troublesome if the machinery cannot run. Isn't that right~?"

"I don't know what you plan on using that power for... But... fuel? When machinery runs, fuel keeps getting consumed. Could it be that voices are like fuel to you?"

"Precisely~ Because the 'voices' of bells are not eternal. The louder a bell rings, the faster the sound wears away~ In other words, once we deplete the power, the borrowed voices will also vanish~"

Instantly, the aura of wrath exuded from Fear and the girls became even more dangerous.

"Sorry—But starting from this moment, we have no reason to let you off at all."

"I actually think that was the case from the beginning. However, it looks like I must demonstrate to you, with even less hesitation than before, the difference between a sword and a set of antique bells."

"In other words, once they accomplish their goal, Yachi's voice can never be restored again... Absolutely ridiculous. Ahhh, how incurably and absolutely ridiculous..."

"We will take the voices back seriously. To think that Haru's pillow talk cannot be heard anymore, that would be an unforgivable loss to me... Although I've never heard any so far."

"Pillow talk is very important! Simply the echoes are enough to make me feel very blissful!" Sovereignty nodded vigorously in agreement. Just as she tried to step forward, Shiraho instantly grabbed her by the collar to restrain her, of course. After all, Sovereignty's combat strength was lower than Fear and the others. This could not be helped either.

By this point, the opposition between Fear and the girls versus Isuzu's group was firmly entrenched. Perhaps because Isuzu also understood that there was no room for discussion, she spoke:

"Everyone is serious~? In that case, it looks like we have no choice but to engage in battle seriously in turn~ Because we cannot falter. For us to be ourselves, we absolutely cannot give way—"

Isuzu murmured with a calm voice as she raised her right arm lightly. She raised her arm to the side, parallel to the ground. Upon further examination, all the other kagura bells had raised their arms in the same manner. Then—

The sound of bells ringing could be heard.

A ring was heard around Isuzu. Then soon after, the same sound was heard from the bell behind her, followed by a bell beside the previous one. Sonorous and lengthy, the sound of bells was heard from different locations, repeating like echoes. The fifteen bells seemed to be ringing in a chain reaction as the symphony persisted. Then Isuzu's body went "ring!" once again.

"It's not over yet—Become one. Become one and play. One bell echoing the other fourteen bells, another bell echoing the other fourteen bells... Play the sounds of kagura with greater power and endless vastness...!"

The intervals between bells ringing became shorter and shorter. The symphony of bells were gradually playing the sounds of "growing faster" and "growing stronger" in an organized and unhurried rhythm. Maintaining their posture of raised right arms, they made these sounds without moving.

The forest was surrounded by the sound of bells. The sound density was high enough to almost trick one into thinking that the forest itself was an orchestra of bells playing. A single note repeated countless times, rising in speed and strength endlessly. What terrifying sound pressure. Clearly a single note should be a clear and crisp ring of a bell yet they combined to play an extremely onerous and earsplitting song, heavily shrouding the surroundings, like inauspicious screams echoing nonstop in one's mind, also like a certain curse.

Ring. Ring. Fifteen bells sounded. Endless singing. The rhythm continued to speed up. Speeding up faster and faster.

Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring ring ring, ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring ring—!

—Ring.

Peak density. The instant the world of ringing bells reached a critical point of saturation, a final ring of exceptional loudness was heard. Then silently, without even exchanging glances, the musical performers used their hands to play the ending of the song.

Then only silence remained.

Due to the excessive sound density, Haruaki could not help but cover up his ears. Just as he took his hands off in trepidation, turning his gaze forward—

For some reason, he shuddered.

The aura coming from Isuzu's group had changed completely. Moving uniformly in unison, they put down the raised arms. Their faces expressed—

Nothing.

The serene smiles were wiped cleanly away. Their gazes were incomparably hollow, like lifeless dolls that had lost all emotion. Or perhaps these eyes resembled those of a shrine maiden undergoing divine possession—Without reflecting the sights of the mundane world, simply staring at the thrones of the gods located in the far beyond, only dancing nonstop for the gods, shrine maidens in a trance of self-oblivion.

"Let us try again."

"Understood."

Even their voices seemed inorganic. Despite no change in their actual tone of voice, there was clearly something unusual about their timbre. The voices carried a bone-chilling type of coldness, like that of a possessed medium announcing divine oracles of destruction.

Expressionless with empty gazes, Isuzu's group silently took a step forward. Then—

"—Purification, like blowing a ship out to the ocean!"

"!"

After this one sentence, a fierce gust of raging wind began to sweep from underfoot. Despite being a distance away, Haruaki's group was staggering from the wind pressure. Standing up straight with much difficulty, Fear glared severely at Isuzu.

"Tsk... I don't get how this works, but your power increased...?"

"Precisely. Please do not underestimate our united bell ringing."

Isuzu replied in a completely monotonous voice. It was the answer from an expressionless enemy with neither gentleness nor mirth.

She was no weapon but was undoubtedly a threat. Sounds of bells that were able to transmit messages to the gods of nature. Seeing her invoke powers beyond what she had demonstrated before, this fact became even more unmistakable.

Even so, Fear and the girls did not give up on fighting Isuzu's group.

As though cheering for herself, Fear inhaled strongly and said:

"...You can raise your power all you like. But to us, this only means one thing: we don't need to hold back against you, saving us effort. Cursed kagura bells, you are nothing more than noisy toys. Let me show you my sounds in return. I shall let you listen to the sounds of darkness when steel and blades are in action! You will verify with your own ears whose sounds are louder and more acute! Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»—Curse Calling!"

The Rubik's cube turned into a metal cube, then with series of grating noises, gradually transformed into an execution stake.

While Fear threw the stake towards Isuzu before her, Konoha and the others rushed towards the surrounding bells—

With a expression devoid of smiles, using an indifferent voice, Isuzu simply raised her hand in preparation for battle.

"If fighting cannot be avoided, then Isuzu shall not hold back. Let a dance be performed here as an offering to the myriad gods, with bells playing a symphony that reaches the plains of heavens! I am the kagura bell, Isuzu, hereby beseeching the gods to listen to one of the fifteen sounds of music... Now that all bells are present, let the god-reaching bells be heard fifteen-fold! Come, gods of the heavens, gods of the nation, myriad gods—I implore you to listen to my wish!"

Part 2

Fifteen opponents. Naturally, this meant that the members of Haruaki's group had to handle roughly four of them each.

Konoha recalled her memories of battlefields in the past, chopping down relentless swarms of nameless infantry. Four opponents were nothing at all—That was how things were supposed to be.

"...!"

Konoha made a mad dash through the forest, locked on a particular target, using her hand to chop down trees in her way. A second later, the same sound of trees getting chopped down was heard behind her. Instinctively, she leapt side ways. Then she heard the following words:

"Like the way mountains can be cleared of lush vegetation by means of incineration and through the work of sharpened sickles, all sins will be gone, purely purified, and cleanly cleaned!"

Instantly, the space that Konoha occupied mere moments earlier was sliced open by a massive distortion of the air. Then the tree trunk, which she had intended to cut next, slid down with a resounding crash.

"Acting like a vacuum blade? For a bell, that's rather amazing."

"Thank you for your praise."

Expressionless, the bell replied calmly. That sense of calm was most infuriating.

"However—These are simply parlor tricks! Don't you even dare dream of surpassing me in the domain of severing things... I shall make you personally experience how foolish that would be!"

Invisible and sharp blades came flying again, slicing through the air. Brandishing her hand, Konoha chopped them all apart. Konoha intended to proceed and subdue the opponent that was releasing blades of vacuum, but—

"The Spirit, Ibukidonushi, who is the origin of the breath of life—"

"...will breathe and blow sins and impurities..."

"...out to the ends of the underworld!"

At this moment, three shrine maidens in the surroundings chanted in unison to unleash a violent gale. This was the same gust of strong wind that occurred before, sweeping people's feet close to the ground. As much as Konoha stayed on guard, the wind's power was much stronger than before, bolstered by the ritual bell music from earlier, as well as being invoked by three people. Unable to resist, Konoha found her feet beginning to float up.

"Guh...!"

Instantly, Konoha jumped up and performed a flip in midair, landing on all fours with some difficulty. Without pausing in her movements, she kicked the ground like a wild beast and moved swiftly, avoiding the incoming series of wind blades.

Clicking her tongue, Konoha thought:

(Although I said I'll make her understand her folly, our combat styles are too different...!)

Konoha was only able to engage in close quarters combat but these kagura bells were capable of using the power of wind to fight at range, an ability akin to cheating. And as expected of fifteen who could act as one, the unity of their teamwork was completely beyond that of infantry on the battlefield.

Konoha did not stop moving and continued to dodge the enemy's attacks, meanwhile glancing in all directions. Were the others okay?

Kirika could be seen fighting in the distance, using a dead angle formed by the leaves and branches of trees to strangle one of the bells by the neck with her leather belt. However, another bell next to them immediately swung her arm down and chanted a prayer:

"And this was done by following a ritual performed in Heaven; heavenly golden timber was cut up, and arranged upon many shelves!"

As a result, the air seemed to distort as though guided by her arm, severing Kirika's belt. Konoha could see that she had swung an axe formed by stabilizing a blade of wind like the vacuum blades.

"Woah..."

"And heavenly reeds were cut into bits, splintering—"

"...Like needles, while instructions were given to read out the great purification ritual!"

From Kirika's left and right respectively, two bells released needles of air that were invisible to the naked eye. One could imagine their numbers to far surpass what was demonstrated last time. Kirika managed to dodge some of them but could not evade all the needles successfully. Instantly, her clothes were ripped open and a red liquid seeped out from inside—Konoha forcefully suppressed the sense of discomfort surging up her throat. Unfazed by these wounds, Kirika glared at her enemies and extended her cursed belt again.

"...It looks like you should be human, but your body is truly unbelievable."

"Unfortunately, even the power of the gods cannot kill me. I know very well that I cannot defeat you. But even with my arms broken or my eyeballs pierced, I will not give up—!"

Meanwhile, voices could also be heard from Kuroe who was facing off against a quartet just like Konoha.

"There's too many of them. I really wanna get them all at once... Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

"Akin to strong winds capable of blowing away thick layers of clouds—"

"Akin to the winds of morning and evening..."

"...capable of blowing away the mist!"

Kuroe extended ropes of black hair all at once, but they were scattered by the bells' simultaneous release of violent wind. This was the move creating rampaging wind over a wide area that Isuzu had displayed at the very beginning, simple yet difficult to evade.

Apart from blowing and scattering her hair, as the raging wind ramped up in power, simply the backwash was enough to send Kuroe's petite body tipping this way and that. Probably thinking that falling over would present too many openings to the enemy, Kuroe desperately gathered her hair into one thick bundle to entangle one of many trees that were slanting in the wind. Jumping without opposing the wind, she flew and shortened her rope of hair, landing on top of a branch—

"Phew~ That was really close."

"How light and agile. Kusuzu is impressed."

"Well then, Tosuzu shall play along."

The bells murmured softly without any emotional fluctuation, jumping up and riding along the wind. Kuroe extended her rope of hair again to fly towards the next tree. Thus, an aerial battle began, moving above the trees.

Next—

"Take this!"

"There were many of these wild spirits who would not obey, sometimes they were persuaded, and even then if they still would not obey—"

"They were removed by force. As a result, the stones, trees, all the grass and weeds, and even each and every leaf that spoke like humans speak, so that it was so noisy then, obeyed the order to be silent!"

Fear threw the execution stake with a great yell but it was blocked by a wall of silence. Turning the returning execution stake into a hatchet, she charged forward once more. However, Norito prayers sounded again and stopped her.

"Damn it, still blocking so effortlessly...!"

"The timing of your attacks is very easy to discern. Despite the fact that the wall of silence only lasts for but an instant, defending is still easy."

"You dare look down on me...!"

Fear fought desperately and kept jumping, swinging her hatchet as hard as she could to deflect the wind needles and vacuum blades fired by the surrounding bells. However, they were right. Even in close quarters combat, Isuzu and her comrades were still able to use the protective shield of silence. Konoha agreed that Fear's fighting style was easy to read and the timing was easy to figure out. Nevertheless, Konoha still strongly acknowledged the destructive power possessed by those massive tools of torture. To think they could be blocked so effortlessly, was there some way to break through these defenses?

(There must be... No, even if there isn't, we must break through...!)

Konoha bit her lower lip hard and renewed her vigor. Don't forget that this battle involves his voice at stake. That gentle yet calm voice whose quiet words alone were enough to calm one's mind, whose whispers alone were enough to bring warmth to one's heart, whose laughter alone was enough to bring happiness—The voice she loved the most in the entire world.

Konoha stopped and drew in a deep breath.

She could not turn back to the form of a sword. Since they were not facing armed opponents, the Sword-Kill Counter was meaningless. Even if it were not, it would be too dangerous to have Haruaki on the battlefield without his voice. Unable to engage in instantaneous communication, it was most troubling.

Hence, fighting in this manner was the only choice. Going all-out, relentlessly, recklessly, carrying the determination to never falter.

"...I must make you return it. Those who want Haruaki-kun's voice and rely on his voice for power—You're not the only ones!"

Konoha no longer ran and dodged all over the place. Deploying a sword's sharpness all over her body, she charged straight into the rampaging wind summoned by the bells. She could feel the gazes of others, watching from a distance away from the battlefield—Haruaki, Sovereignty, Shiraho, as well as Chihaya.

"..."

Chihaya was dancing. It was the dance presented to the gods, slow yet carrying a sense of tension. The cursed dance of the shrine maiden.

It was not performed by her own will and seemed quite out of place for this battlefield. Nevertheless, her dancing figure was full of mysteriousness indeed. In the center amidst the intensely resounding noise of battle, only the shrine maiden's dance continued quietly without words.

At the same time, her hair and hakama were swaying from the aftereffects of the raging winds.

All this time, Chihaya was gazing upon the girls.

As though praying something.

Or perhaps, cursing something.

Part 3

Haruaki could only watch as his companions fought valiantly despite being outnumbered. Although his inability to take part was a common situation, he still could not help but gnash his teeth.

"Oh no... Dangerous...! Phew~, thank goodness, she dodged it... If only I could fight alongside them..."

"No way, I'm not going to allow you to do something so dangerous! Absolutely forbidden! Even if you could fashion multiple dolls out of the trees, you're only able to control them within your line of sight, right? Ultimately, it's pointless if all you can do is attack one person at a time. Your efforts would amount to no more than a drop in the bucket."

"I-I can't argue with that, but..."

While listening to Shiraho and Sovereignty's exchange, Haruaki continued to watch Fear and the others.

To be honest, they were stuck in a desperate battle. The disparity in numbers was too great. Moreover, Isuzu's group was also capable of various moves such as wind and walls of silence. If anything, they were the type of enemy skilled in defense. Landing a decisive blow was impossible.

However, Fear and the girls did not give up at all. Despite panting, despite bleeding, they still attacked Isuzu's group valiantly—

Only time continued to flow nonstop. Nevertheless, the situation did not remain unchanged. As time flowed by, the battlefield began to undergo subtle changes.

"Hmm... Huff... Ah..."

The sound of hakama rubbing was heard. Haruaki turned to see Chihaya collapsed on the ground, her shoulders heaving up and down as she panted. She had apparently just finished the dance required by the curse.

Also, there were two other changes—the increasing number of dark clouds, just as the weather report predicted, as well as—

"This... Situation is getting urgent..."

Emotionlessly, Isuzu and her comrades looked up at the sky and frowned, pausing in what they were doing. Perhaps perplexed by their reaction, Fear and the girls, all covered in wounds, also halted to observe Isuzu's faction.

"What shall we do?"

"Impossible to assert whether trivialities should be neglected in favor of the important matter. Musuzu proposes: In any case, we must get moving first."

"Tosuzu seconds the motion."

"Then it cannot be helped. Isuzu shall lead the way."

Isuzu's group exchanged glances among themselves and nodded. Then they scattered and ran through the forest. The encirclement was over. Greatly alarmed, Konoha said:

"W-Wait up...!"

But of course, Isuzu's group did not respond and simply disappeared out of sight.

"What's going on? What is their intent...?"

"At any rate, we have a crisis! Once they deplete their power, the voices will vanish. We must catch up to them. But where have they run off to? Damn it, to have allowed them to escape at this time, how absolutely ridiculous!"

Just as Fear and the others were about to rush out despite their puzzlement, Chihaya supported herself with her arms against the ground and slowly got up, having resumed breathing regularly. Her eyes were

staring into the forest that had been plunged into darkness like nighttime due to the obscured sun.

"Oh... Really? Sure enough... They're... going to that place—In other words, the oracle back then was about..."

"Although I have absolutely no interest in this, let me ask you a question just in case. You seem to know where these multiplying shrine maidens have gone off to, don't you?"

Shiraho crossed her arms indifferently and questioned. Chihaya did not answer. Fear, whose clothing had become tattered all over from the fight, grabbed Chihaya's collar impatiently.

"Where? Where did they go? Spill it out!"

Although Fear shook Chihaya forcefully, she still did not answer but simply stared blankly into the depths of the forest. However, the force of Fear's shaking gradually grew smaller—

And finally stopped.

"Please. Seriously... I beg you... If you want me to kneel, I'll kneel. If you have anything you want, I'll give it to you. But apart from the voices Isuzu stole. W-We, no matter what, must get Haruaki's voice back."

"..."

"I only realized just now. Even though I think I know a lot, there are many things I have completely no idea at all. About his family, his past, his house—There's so much that I wanna ask him. I still hope he'll tell me more things. Not through cold, stiff, writing but using his usual voice to tell me. So please..."

Holding onto Chihaya's collar, Fear pressed her forehead against Chihaya's chest. Fear's appearance and voice were transmitted into Haruaki's heart with definite mass and substance. She desired his voice from the bottom of her heart, seeking it with sincerity akin to a prayer's. This sincerity—Haruaki wondered if it could reach into the depths of Chihaya's heart as well.

Fear lowered her voice more and whispered her words:

"Hey... I'm sure you can't be fine with this, right? Once their goal is reached, the voices they stole for power will disappear. Your father's voice will disappear too. Are you okay with this? Is it really okay...?"

Chihaya's body shook. Having poured all her wishes into her voice, Fear was also shaking. A short while later, Chihaya whispered softly:

"I didn't know. I didn't even know at all... He had been making phone calls..."

"..."

"It's fine even if I don't work so hard, right? I don't need to try so hard by myself anymore... Ahhh, maybe, seriously..."

She was probably murmuring to herself. Haruaki and his companions could not understand the true meaning of her words and the sincere feelings they carried. But they wanted to understand.

"...That's right. Even if I... and Isuzu... protected it—But on the other hand, if that guy's voice is gone, surely... Mom... will be even more..."

Chihaya nodded lightly once. Another motion she did for herself.

Then she started sprinting without warning, dashing into the forest. Perhaps due to the fatigue from the dance, she fell over along the way, getting dirt and mud over her face and clothes. However, she instantly got up and made a mad dash while staring intently ahead.

"H-Hey!"

"Even though I still don't get it—This means you're willing to lead the way, right!? Everyone, follow along if you're able to run!"

"Of course. We'll lose her if we don't give chase!"

"A-Anyway, I'm coming too~!"

"Hey, Sovereignty! This has nothing to do with us... Uh, jeez, what a pain! Clearly all I planned for was a New Year's first shrine visit, why did it turn into a hike!? If it starts to rain, this will be truly tragic. When the time comes, I shall demand cleaning damages from you as compensation, enough to purchase an entire laundry shop, human!"

Not only Shiraho's but of course, Haruaki's own clothing was also unsuited for running in a forest. However, now was not the time to be concerned

over such matters. Traversing thickets, jumping over dirt, they chased after Chihaya in her red hakama as she raced on ahead.

After running along the pond located before the shrine for roughly five minutes—The view suddenly became wide open.

Before them was a vast, wide open space in the forest, roughly the size of a small park.

"...A kitchen garden...?"

Just as Konoha whispered, before their eyes was a field resembling a kitchen garden. Over many ridges and furrows, numerous plants resembling vegetables had their leaves stretched out. Vines were entangled around regularly spaced and upright rods.

"This is my mother's hobby. Starting a long time ago, she would plant all sorts of things here. My mother cherished this place a lot. Even after being hospitalized, she kept worrying about the situation here. If anything, this would be my mother's treasure..."

"That said, it looks quite neat and tidy right now. Have you been taking care of it?"

Chihaya looked at the field and smiled in self-mockery.

"Hmph, I simply did things casually while looking at the notes my mother wrote for me. Because I have no interest in planting vegetables at all. But simply with some casual watering on Mom's behalf... Incredibly, it grew on me. Oh, the Chinese cabbage over there looks like it's almost ready to be harvested. Mom loves eating Chinese cabbage, so I took the most care with them and looked forward to the harvest... Thinking if it's successful, I could take some over to show Mom. That's right, if they could be harvested successfully..."

Chihaya murmured softly while slowly sweeping her gaze towards the edge of the field. Over on a long and narrow space, standing shoulder to shoulder in a row, was of course, the fifteen kagura bells. They were also staring intently at the vegetables in the field.

As though saying "strike while the iron is hot," Kirika silently extended her belt while Kuroe lengthened her hair. Without saying a word, they tied up the necks of three bells, dragging their targets over with all their strength.

At this distance, it was probably impossible for the other bells to cut the bonds using axes of wind. Although that was what they thought—

"Nisuzu, Yasuzu, Tooisuzu... Revert."

Nevertheless, the three prisoners suddenly vanished. Kirika and Kuroe stared wide-eyed as their weapons lost their targets. However, the three shrine maidens did not simply disappear into thin air. The shrine maiden outfits slid to the ground and in their place were—

Three small and exquisite bells.

Ringling softly, they flew into the air as though pulled by a rope, then gathered towards one of the shrine maidens—presumably Isuzu.

"Apart from Isuzu who has become the main body for now, taking human form requires passing through Isuzu's body—Even we forgot this point. This probably stems from the fact that the fifteen bells are considered one entity, but it's quite troublesome."

Stopping on Isuzu's outstretched palm, the bells quickly disappeared into her body. But then Isuzu instantly waved her arm three times. Each time, a bell flew out of her palm and took on human form again. Naturally, all of them were naked but now was not the time to be concerned by such things.

"Hmm..."

"They really know how to make the most of their true forms... However, this will be quite a pain. Given this move, it means I can't naively believe that catching you with my hair is enough. What should we do?"

"We must find a way! At any rate, we must find a way! That shameless appearance like Cow Tits', is just as annoying as Cow Tits herself! What a public danger!"

"There are many things out of my control when turning to my original form! However, I do agree that these people's display of indecency cannot be forgiven! If possible, Haruaki-kun, please close your eyes!"

That request is pushing things too far, Haruaki thought to himself.

During this conversation, Isuzu's group slowly turned to face towards them. Still exuding an aura of divine possession, they spoke with a voice completely devoid of emotion:

"—You have arrived? But currently, we have no time to bother with you."

"We have been saying all along, we won't give up. However, let me ask one more time. Do you really refuse to give up on what you intend to do next?"

"Of course, we absolutely will not give up. Isn't that right, Chihaya-sama?"

With no fluctuation of emotion, Isuzu turned her eyes towards her master as though seeking consent.

But after a few seconds, Chihaya shook her head.

"...Giving up... is fine, Isuzu... No, rather, Isuzu, stop it now."

"Incomprehensible. This is your wish, Chihaya-sama. This is unmistakably your wish beyond a doubt, Chihaya-sama."

"This—Yeah, maybe it is. But no, this isn't how I want it. Sacrificing that guy's voice... That kind of thing... isn't my wish at all..."

This time, it was Isuzu's turn to shake her head. Not just Isuzu but also all fifteen of them shook their heads together.

"Since you say 'maybe it is'—That means that this is definitely Chihaya-sama's wish without a doubt. We are the kagura bells for conveying wishes to the gods. As kagura bells, carrying the pride of kagura bells, we must grant Chihaya-sama's wish. This alone is the meaning of our existence."

"...!"

Chihaya's face became distorted as she clenched her fists. Clearly, Isuzu and company did not intend to give up on achieving their goal no matter what Chihaya said. Haruaki's group knew this too.

"Looks like you don't intend to follow orders. Then there's no choice but to fight it out. Let's go... Nugyuh!?"

"Hold on! You should already know that these are not opponents you can instantly subdue just by rushing headlong! I'd like to start fighting them instantly too, but can't we have some strategy!? Strategy! I'll concede honestly, our combat compatibility is too poor! If this continues, as much as I'm loathed to admit, there's no chance for us to draw out our strengths!"

Konoha had performed a lariat move to stop Fear from charging. While watching Isuzu's group slowly spread out in a formation, Fear's team quickly discussed. Haruaki also racked his brain desperately. What way was there? Was there any method to defeat them—?

"Hey! In that case, you tell me, Cow Tits. You're the most talented in underhanded battle tactics."

"I'm not thinking of any underhanded battle tactics at all. However, if I really had to point out their one and only weak point—It's the fact that they're not very used to battle. Despite being capable of spells, despite overwhelming numbers, despite perfect teamwork, we still have an advantage purely in the area of combat experience. That is how we've managed to put up a fight to this point."

"Indeed, they are not without openings. Like just now, Kuroe and I were able to catch them while they were distracted. But they were able to turn into bells to escape afterwards. This is quite tricky to handle."

"Judging from what happened and what they said, turning back into human requires returning to the boss... Then is there any opening to exploit there? Ficchi, did you notice anything?"

"Lemme think—About those wind techniques, it looks like they can't use more than one at a time. Attack and defense has to occur separately and that defensive shield also seems to be a difficult spell for them, so they can't move out while using it."

"Speaking of which, that defense... is called the wall of silence? There's that as well. The wall is very difficult to break through."

After Kuroe finished, Fear lightly shook her drill. Glancing forward, she said:

"Yes, that defensive wall is very sturdy. However—if I'm only facing one of them, I think it's not impossible to handle. As long as I make good use of my mechanisms."

"What a pointless assumption, kindred. We are having this discussion precisely because our opponents number fifteen, right? Seriously, I have no interest in mucking about in soil and would rather get home earlier."

A number of weaknesses. Things that only they could do. What way was there to link all these details together? Haruaki pondered desperately.

They needed to find a way to connect the weaknesses presented by Isuzu's group. There was no time. Hurry, hurry—!

His helplessness made him gnash his teeth. Without a voice, without power, if he could not help by providing ideas then he would be truly useless. Hurry and think, hurry and think, hurry and think!

At this moment—Apparently feeling the same sense of powerlessness, Sovereignty shrank her shoulders and murmured softly:

"Sniff sniff, I wanna help everyone too. I guess I really should've collected stuff like superalloy robots from elsewhere... Even if I can only handle one enemy, it might make a difference."

"Here you go talking like that again. Didn't I say already? It's too dangerous. Not allowed. Besides, by this point, there's no time to be carving wood to make dolls. You should just give up."

Dolls—Dolls? Haruaki suddenly felt a flash across his mind. Then he had a sudden revelation.

If that were present. If everything could be shrewdly connected together—

Perhaps, there would be a way to make Isuzu's group present more openings at least. Then after that—

(Probably... something like this... Then, because Fear mentioned before...)

Will it work? The problem was the step: was she carrying that.

"...Wah!"

Haruaki reached out towards Chihaya. Perhaps because she misunderstood something, she struggled violent in a panic.

"Y-You great big pervert! What the heck, there's no meaning in using me as a hostage by this point! I know, you're trying to use this as an excuse to do perverted things to me legitimately, right!? G-Give me a break!"

"Shameless brat, have you finally been overcome by your lust!? Hurry and release her!"

Fear thrust the drill towards Haruaki. Although it was quite a pain, unless he explained himself, that drill could very well end up stabbed into his body. Haruaki typed briefly on his cellphone with one hand:

'A plan.'

"A plan...?"

While Fear was frowning, Haruaki used his other hand to search for his target. Naturally, he was not targeting Chihaya's bosom or her thighs.

Instead, it was the bag hanging on her shoulder.

(...Got it!)

There were two things that he needed. Haruaki examined the bag's interior and found both present, quite miraculously.

"I see, using these...!"

Konoha examined the bag's contents as well and instantly showed comprehension in her eyes. However—

"But will it really work that smoothly...?"

Of course, using them in a conventional way would not work that smoothly. Hence, how they were to be used required some effort. Haruaki typed on his cellphone the fastest that he had ever typed in his life, suggesting how these things should be used.

The core of the suggestion was based on the fact that Isuzu's group was not used to fighting.

Also, there was no choice but to ask Konoha, who had commented on poor combat compatibility hampering her ability to draw out her power, to take center stage with an active role in his plan. In various ways, this active role would probably displease her. However, it could not be helped under the circumstances.

After all, it was undeniable truth that her body was the easiest to hide this thing.

The plan of attack was decided. Faced with Isuzu's group who had entered formation and about to attack any moment, Konoha took a step forward. Just Konoha alone. The others remained on standby without moving from their positions.

"...Just you alone?"

"Indeed. In any case, it's decided that I shall bring out my true power for a grand performance. After all, I'm afraid of hurting my friends if they are close by."

Konoha smiled fearlessly.

"I don't know what rural village you came from, but at least you've heard how terrifying I am as the demon blade? Then you shall see for yourselves whether those horrifying rumors are true or not. Who knows if cursed bells like you are capable of withstanding the true power of a cursed weapon."

"The ones who listen to our bell ringing are the myriad gods ruling over nature... A Japanese sword crafted by humans cannot reach the myriad gods, after all."

Isuzu still resembled a shrine maiden in a trance with her eyes glazed over and her voice hollow. At this moment, staring at Konoha's back, Kuroe gave orders like a movie director:

"Kono-san, you need to be more scary! They're not scared at all! You need to draw more of their attention!"

"E-Even if you tell me that..."

Konoha tilted her head slightly and spoke barely loud enough for Haruaki's group to hear, in an agonized voice.

"Then it can't be helped... As much as I don't wanna use this move."

"...What move? If there's a way, hurry and tell us."

"Yes, this is for the urgent crisis. Well then... Kono-san, what are you fighting for?"

Konoha's shoulders shook once.

"Of course—To take back Haruaki-kun's voice."

"That's something very precious, right?"

"Yes, extremely precious."

"And to think those girls stole something so precious, how unforgivable. It's infuriating."

"—That goes without saying."

Konoha's voice gradually grew stiff as though she was remembering her wrath. Kuroe nodded and said:

"Then I must tell you, Kono-san, a secret. Back then, because we were afraid of shocking you too much, after discussing with Ficchi and Kiririn, we decided to lie to you, Kono-san."

"What lie?"

"When Haru's voice was taken, we said that a certain fully nude person was sucking on his ear to steal his voice, right? Sorry, that was a lie. According to Haru's explanation, really—"

Konoha's back suddenly went stiff. As though gears were grating noisily, her voice was heard with suppressed anger.

"Impossible—"

"Yes. Actually, she used the same method that she used to steal Ficchi's voice. In other words, one of those girls there, after pushing Haru down by force, fully nude, was kissing him on the lips in unparalleled ecstasy~"

(Hey hey! I never said anything like that!)

Perhaps Kuroe already accounted for his inability to protest, hence she fabricated the facts as she pleased. Konoha's back began to exude a most bone-chilling aura. Haruaki could feel an extremely evil and eerie atmosphere, almost darker than the surroundings under the black clouds in the sky.

"Then she also stuck her tongue inside and licked as she pleased. At the same time, she even used her other hand to caress the area around the zipper of Haru's pants—"

"—Enough."

"Okay."

Kuroe instantly stopped obediently. Konoha stared intently ahead and simply pushed her glasses up lightly. Without needing to look, Haruaki knew what expression she was making. Most likely she had already gone past her critical point. Her eyes had already returned to that of the demon sword which had once taken the lives of countless victims—

"Oh, is that so? Is that really the case? A mere bell, what bold insolence—Who could have thought that thou art foolish enough to believe thou couldst touch what is mine and still live!"

"...!"

Haruaki's skin trembled and instantly formed goosebumps. The demonic aura was quite terrifying. Naturally, Isuzu's group also felt it. Faced with true killing intent, possibly for the very first time, they could not help but enter a defensive stance with a chill down their spine despite their vacant quality. Indeed—The pressure produced by Konoha was heavy enough that one would not feel surprised to be killed in an instant the moment one looked away.

Konoha took a step forward.

"How now? Come at me, will ye not? This sword shall be your direct opponent. O foolish bells, O bells, O bells! Since ye desire to ring yourselves so much, let this sword provide ye with assistance. Ye shall make enough noise—as much as necessary, let cries for help, gasps of pain, screams of despair and moans of pleasure be heard! Let alone fifteen, a hundred or two shall not pose any problem. Before the gods, allow this sword to present your lovely music for them to enjoy!"

"A presence akin to rampaging spirits... Danger!"

Isuzu's team rushed forward in an organized formation, lifting their arms. The greatest threat of the highest priority lay there. The astounding killing intent exuded when Konoha got serious was truly impossible to ignore. Over there was something that demanded attention no matter what.

...Hence, that was why she had to be tasked with the job.

"Kuhaha!" Konoha gave off evil laughter like a villain, but just as she was about to rush forward, Kuroe yelled frantically:

"Kono-san, Kono-san~! You're immersing yourself too much in the role, don't forget~!"

"...Tsk!"

Konoha clicked her tongue after hearing Kuroe yelling and stopped herself just as she was about to charge ahead.

"Phew... I did mention being unable to play an active role, but being active in this way... Ahhh, geez! Anyway, by this point, whatever! At any rate, this simply gives me another reason that I cannot forgive you all!"

Instantly, Konoha's cheeks went red—At the same time, she grabbed her collar with both hands and pulled it apart sideways, ignoring the noisy ripping of her clothes.

"Sovereignty-san!"

"Coming coming~! I hold sovereignty over every doll. Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship—Obey!"

Sovereignty possessed the name of the Sovereignty-Perfection-Doll. Under her control, a certain object jumped out from Konoha's cleavage—the straw effigy that was originally kept in Chihaya's bag. Its size was too big to fit in a pocket, but it had to be hidden from the eyes of Isuzu's group, hence that was the only hiding place... Although Haruaki felt quite apologetic to Konoha.

"Then... Uh, that needs to be pulled, right? There!"

Standing on Konoha's chest, the straw effigy was also holding another tool. Similarly, it was also something that was taken from Chihaya's bag. A container, roughly palm-sized—A flash grenade Chihaya had made for self-defense.

The straw effigy weaved its arms through the ring that was installed on one end of the container and pulled it with a comical action as though cheering. Instantly, the flash grenade exploded. Naturally, Haruaki's group expected this and either closed their eyes or guarded their eyes with their hands to block the sudden eruption of bright light. But after witnessing Konoha's aura of murderous intent, Isuzu's team was naturally focused on her and completely caught by surprise.



"Uwah...!"

"How troubling. Their inexperience in battle truly helped us out a lot. Clearly with such superior numbers, why were they all staring in the same spot? In any case—Ueno-san, Kuroe-san, Fear-san!"

"I know! «Tragic Black River»!"

The cursed belt attacked the shrine maidens who were all deprived of their eyesight temporarily and immobilized. The belt first wrapped around one of them multiple times, restraining her securely, then extended its tip and proceeded to the second person. Then doing the same, it went for the third.

"Ohoh, this really reminds me of the way persimmons are tied up and dried under the sun~ However, given that I'm not limited to one weapon, I must work even harder! Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

Kuroe extended numerous ropes formed from bundles of hair, tying up enemies as soon they came within range, capturing a total of six of them.

"I also have tools of torture that can restrain multiple people at once. Although I never thought of using them—Let me show you how an inauspicious tool of sadism like me hasn't gone rusty at all!"

Fear casually threw the drill, stabbing it in the ground near the remainder of Isuzu's group. At this moment, she ordered it to transform into one of her emulated forms.

"Mechanism No.17 binding type, birdcage form: «The Flocking Storks»—Curse Calling!"

Instantly, several identical restraining tools appeared, linked to a base by metal chains. The restraining tools were triangular in shape, each with a steel ring at the peak, with the rods extending outwards on both sides also made of steel. The centers and the ends of the rods, in other words, the two other corners of the triangles, also had small steel rings. Although Haruaki could not imagine what these simple-looking steel implements were used for, of course she would know. She would know better than anyone else in the world.

"This is a type of torture tool that completely restrains a person, folding the four limbs and the head together. Because it secures victims in a very unnatural posture, after spending too much time in it, some people die from

lack of circulation. As for why I would have so many of these in my body, the answer is obvious—In the past, my owner used these tools to restrain families and friends together, lining them up in a row, making bets on who would die first. He even said that he'd let the rest go once the first person dies, thus causing families to curse one another: 'You hurry and die first! Hurry and die!' He even treated these cursing voices as a bell, listening to them with great delight! But I don't wanna listen to your voices, so just shut up—And fall down!"

Fear pulled the connecting chain of cubes, causing the triangular shackles to move independently. First of all, the large rings at the peaks of the triangles restrained the necks of Isuzu's comrades, then the steel rods connected to the rings shook as though they were alive while using the rings on their centers to bind the wrists. Having forced the girls to bend over from the weight, the rings at the ends of the rods were used to bind the ankles. Next, the screws installed in the rings and the rods began to turn, grating as they applied pressure on the girls' bodies—

"Guh, ooh... Ooooh...!"

The postures they were forced into was akin to sitting with their knees drawn up to their chests—But to the limit imposed by the human body's structure. Naturally, they could not sit properly at all. With all four limbs restrained, they could only roll helplessly about on the ground. Like Kuroe, Fear had restrained six of them.

Three + Six + Six. The fifteen kagura bells were all captured, unable to move.

"Guh... To think all members... would be captured—"

"Yes, it's as though we split things up perfectly beforehand! With Kirika and Kuroe on our side, given the chance, catching fifteen people is easy as pie!"

"No—Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, it is still too soon for you to relax!"

Strange as it were to agree with the enemy, it was definitely true.

However, Haruaki's group already knew what they were going to do next. Just as Fear began to run as fast as she could, Isuzu's group turned back into their original form as bells, just as predicted.

Fear quickly swept her gaze across the fifteen bells that had successfully escaped the hair, the belt and the torture tools within the blink of an eye. Only one bell had a handle with colored ribbons and was also strung on a ring at the tip of the handle. Fear originally intended to decide after observing the direction where the bells gathered, but there was no need seeing as it was so obvious. Without a doubt, this one bell was the main body for the fifteen kagura bells—Isuzu, who was basically the leader right now.

Fear stared intently at this bell with the handle and transformed «The Flocking Storks» back to the black, metallic cube before pulling it back using the chain of cubes. After a moment's delay, the other fourteen bells flew towards the bell with the handle as though drawn to it.

"That's right. Because you mentioned that you must return to your boss in order to change into human form...!"

"...!"

Just as the fourteen bells connected to the ring of the kagura bell set, the bell with the handle transformed into a human. Stripped of the shrine maiden outfit with her voluptuous body exposed—Isuzu. After noticing Fear approach, she looked up in surprise and raised her arm, presumably intending to change the other bells to human form again. Next, she invoked the wall of silence.

"—There were many of these wild spirits who would not obey, sometimes they were persuaded, and even then if they still would not obey, they were removed by force. As a result, the stones, trees, all the grass and weeds, and even each and every leaf that spoke like humans speak, so that it was so noisy then, obeyed the order to be silent!"

The silent shield of absolute defense was deployed all around her. However, Fear grinned:

"I knew you'd use this move—But you made a wrong decision. Unlike Cow Tits, I'm not a 'weapon.' There's no need for me to break your wall!"

Controlling the chain of cubes, Fear slid her emulated cube towards Isuzu's side like a ferocious hunting hound. Then—

"Mechanism No.10 gripping type, compressing form: «Iron Coffin of Lissa»—Curse Calling!"

The cube opened up. Without touching Isuzu's body directly, it spread steel plates around her with the creaking of machinery. The steel plates dug through the soil and burrowed under her feet to form a floor. Walls of steel also stood upright by her side like majestic castle walls. A ceiling was also formed as though intending to prevent prayers from reaching the high heavens of the night sky. Literally, Isuzu was locked away in a coffin-like sealed space.

"Right now, it's just an ordinary room. But if I use it as a torture tool, it becomes like this!"

Fear gripped the chain of cubes harder, causing the steel coffin imprisoning Isuzu to play a symphony of grating steel as the walls and ceiling moved. Naturally, the space inside was being compressed.

This was a device resembling a suspended ceiling. Locking the victim inside, slowly shrinking the space, without using blades or sharp spikes, a simple torture tool that abused people simply through the use of "volume."

The device's movements gradually became smaller, then stopped at a certain point. The reason was simple.

"Ugh—!"

"Yes, I knew that wall couldn't be broken by compression. Very well, even though I've no idea how long your ability can persist, let's wait patiently. I'm willing to wait for as long as it takes. Feel free to release wind blades all you want. Feel free to summon your companions all you want. After all, both of these actions would only serve to increase your suffering!"

Isuzu's defensive shield resisted Fear's coffin of steel for a while. Then suddenly with a clang, the steel coffin started moving again. Precisely because simple torture through volume was so simple, it was completely impossible to resist. Whether vertically or horizontally, the space had shrunk to a point incomparable to its initial size. But inverse proportionally, the screams coming from inside the steel coffin became more and more tragic.

"Gah... Huff... Ooh... Ahhhhhhhh!"

"What's the matter, cursed kagura bell, isn't this your prided voice!? Unless I release you, no matter how you endure, you cannot escape! The twisting of your body must be painful and your bones must be creaking! Would you like to be crushed to death just like that!?"

"H-Hey, you people are going way too far... Enough already... Stop it now!"

Chihaya could not bear to watch and yelled, but Fear continued to stare at the steel coffin without moving at all and simply said:

"If you die, the voices will probably return, so it doesn't actually matter to me. Be that as it may, your master has spoken. Looks like this girl wants you to live. So, hurry and make your choice. Are you instantly returning the voices you stole or do you want to continue suffering until you're crushed to death?"

"Ooh... Ahhh..."

"Isuzu... Ahhh, jeez, you're really a moron! You should know that this girl won't release you until you return the voices! What can you do in this state? What can you do if you're crushed!? If you don't get out from there first, nothing can begin!"

Chihaya roared angrily. The groaning suddenly stopped. As though time had stopped, silence descended.

However, time did not actually stop. A new sound started, pitter-pattering.

Rain.

Dark clouds had increased rapidly ever since noon and occupied the sky ominously all this time. Now, it finally began to rain. The leaves and branches of the surrounding trees also played a pitter-pattering symphony. The exposed soil on the ground began to soften. Tens, hundreds of raindrops were striking the surface of the steel coffin that compressed Isuzu, producing a noisy racket.

Hence, Isuzu also heard the rain from inside.

"It has already... started raining... Too late... No, if this continues, nothing can be done to save... On no, how did it come to this..."

These soft murmurings seemed to be coming from inside the coffin. Immediately, Shiraho, who had been watching everything happen, sighed in exasperation and said:

"Hoo... Look, people, it's starting to rain. Judging from the current conditions, the rain will become more and more heavy. Ahhh, seriously, how do you intend to take responsibility for this!? I'm about to faint simply from the thought of how dirty my clothes and shoes will get in the process

of leaving this forest. To think you'd plan on the very first day of the new year to drench Sovereignty and me, allowing you to violate us visually, your bizarre fetishes have gone too far, human! Otherwise, hurry and make this rain stop!"

"Uh, it's really troubling that you're even blaming the weather on me!"

"As if anyone cares about you. Fine, then I shall compromise. Since it is currently raining, plants cannot carry out photosynthesis in the dim conditions. Why don't you help the world by reducing that bit of carbon dioxide? A human who only wastes the world's oxygen should make some contributions occasionally, right? My suggestion is this—Yes, something along the lines of dying. Or perhaps, dying might be good. Rather, how about you simply go and die?"

"Aren't they all the same... Eh?"

"...?"

Something was not right. Shiraho eyed Haruaki in puzzlement. At the same time, Fear and the rest turned to look at him and called out in surprise.

"Haruaki, did you just speak? You spoke just now!?"

"Yachi... Phew~ You've finally recovered? Good grief."

"Wow~! This is wonderful, this is truly wonderful!"

"So true, ahhh... To be able to hear Haruaki-kun's voice again is truly wonderful... Oh right. After recovering your voice, if the first name you call out is mine, it'll feel particularly special...! Haruaki-kun, Haruaki-kun, in order to confirm whether your voice is restored, test it again! Please try calling my name!"

"Nuu... I don't quite get it but the thought of Cow Tits' name being the first to be called makes me quite mad! Hey, Haruaki, why don't you call out mine instead? Cow Tits takes two words but my name is only one word! It's a better deal!"

"You're the only one who calls me that! Haruaki-kun, 'Konoha' is only one word as well!"

Instantly, a chaotic commotion arose. Haruaki went "Ah~" and "Ooh~" to test out his throat—

"If you feel that the situation is weird, you don't have to force yourself to speak. I've got some cough drops with me, want some?"

"Hmm... No, it shouldn't be a problem. Thank you, Kuroe."

Fear and Konoha's jaws fell wide open in shock. For some reason, even Kirika was murmuring incomprehensibly: "Hmm... I was originally planning to find an unobtrusive opportunity too...!" while she sighed. Then inexplicably, Kuroe made a V-sign for victory along with her usual blank gaze.

Although things returned to the usual liveliness, it could not persist indefinitely.

"Since my voice is back, that means the priest and the others have recovered their voices too. Fear, it's time to release her..."

"Muu. That's right... Let me praise you just for making the correct choice at last."

Fear waved the chain of cubes lightly, causing the steel coffin to disappear suddenly, revealing Isuzu who was curled up into an uncomfortable posture. Haruaki was originally considering whether to bring her a shrine maiden outfit, but Fear and the girls were still watching her warily.

However, Isuzu did not show any intention to resist after regaining her freedom. Perhaps due to releasing the stolen voices, the otherworldly and ice-cold aura of divine possession had vanished completely. Her hands fell to the gradually moistening ground with a splash as she murmured softly in an extremely depressed voice:

"Ahhh... How could... this happen, with this... It's already... hopeless to do anything...!"

"That's right, it's hopeless for you now. Have you given up? Or do you still plan on stealing other people's voices? If that's the case, I'll have to let you taste the same suffering again."

"Fufu... Starting now... Even if new voices are taken... It's too late. At least fifteen portions... No, the voices and power of at least ten people, perhaps that would be possible... Oh no, but it's really too late! Now Chihaya-sama's wish cannot be fulfilled. Once again, we have failed in our duties...!"

Haruaki and his companions exchanged glances with one another. What did Isuzu plan to do by stealing the voices? What was their goal? All along, Haruaki's group only managed to grasp faint clues but have not found the answer.

But among those present, one person had already solved the riddle.

"By this point... Let me tell you guys about the last ability she possesses. That's the 'oracle.' Like the way shrine maidens serving gods can listen to divine messages, this girl can occasionally predict the future. Rather, 'receiving predictions' would be more accurate perhaps. Even if she doesn't always understand the meaning of the prediction herself, through fragments of sentences or images, she can obtain information on what's going to happen in the future. But she has no control over this power, so just like this instance of rain, it happens only on occasion. This is the reason why I knew to prepare a flash grenade in my first encounter with you guys."

Knowing Isuzu better than anyone else, Chihaya spoke quietly. The rain, gradually falling harder and harder, struck Chihaya's face. With a lonely gaze, she bowed her head and looked down towards Isuzu:

"It's okay already, Isuzu? Hurry and tell us—What oracle did you receive just before you stole the silver-haired girl's voice? Maybe you withheld it because you were afraid that I couldn't take it, but by the time you came to this place, I've already guessed it basically."

Isuzu slowly looked up with rain sliding down from the corners of her eyes, looking as though she were crying. Gazing at her master, but speaking with a trembling voice, she turned her face down at the ground again.

"...I saw a series of fragmented images. Heavy rain that resembled the one that destroyed our village, raging winds of a storm, as well as turbulent flows running between the trees. Then—there was this vegetable garden belonging to Chihaya-sama's mother. Linking them together, Isuzu's interpretation was—"

"That's right, it does mean that this rain today is probably going to destroy this kitchen garden."

"...Yes."

Haruaki's group was rendered speechless. That oracle was what motivated Isuzu's actions? Then it meant that—

"I understand it all now. You acted for my sake, acting to fulfill my wish. And my wish is to protect the place for Mom to return to. Yes, that's right, this place is the most symbolic. It's also the place I want to protect the most. Every day, I come here to water the plants."

"Yes... Chihaya-sama used us—Isuzu—for the sake of realizing your own wish. And in order to be able to handle emergencies that could happen at a moment's notice, you strengthened our curse and gave us power."

"I was only thinking of doing some preparations beforehand in case I needed to drive away an intruder in a sudden robbery. By the way, since my family's shrine is so old and decrepit without any guards, arsonists are probably the top concern."

While listening to Chihaya, Haruaki recalled. In order to give Isuzu power, Chihaya had kept herself in an environment near curses, doing the unacceptable job of being a curse expert and even deliberately wore an outfit to make herself displeased. This was all done to fulfill her wish. It was for this purpose that made her need Isuzu's power.

Haruaki really did not know if her behavior was commendable or deplorable. However, he could sympathize with the intensity and simple honesty of her wish.

"But... after seeing the images delivered by the oracle, you began to think, in order to protect this kitchen garden... Only this... Simply collecting the power of curses was not enough, right?"

"Please allow me... to say in fear and trepidation—Exactly. The reason lies in the greatest memory of why we kagura bells were cursed... We once possessed the power to control weather. Although it's basically just the power to control wind, so long as the sounds of the fifteen bells are restored, allowing us to unleash the maximum power we possess—"

"I-I get it too. You were planning to gather human voices and use that power to blow these dark clouds away, right!? What an utterly foolish notion. The weather forecast already said that this rainstorm is on the level of a typhoon!"

"But... It's already... no good. The voices, the power, all is returned already. Remaining in Isuzu is only the power produced from the half of Chihaya-sama's voice taken due to the curse. All the other bells cannot ring anymore. Yet we were supposed to be kagura bells for granting wishes...!"

"What the fuck? How inane."

Chihaya's words were like an additional blow to the dejected Isuzu. However, despite her coarse language, Chihaya was looking downwards at Isuzu's face with an exhausted smile.

"I think I've said it already... You've got your priorities wrong. There's no need to complete this task if you need to go so far as to take that guy's voice. Idiot... You're really an idiot... But maybe I'm the biggest idiot of all. This isn't your fault. Only now have I realized that I've gotten my priorities wrong, so I'm the biggest..."

"Chihaya... sama..."

"If this place gets washed away, it can't be helped. Even if that power of the gods, capable of blowing dark clouds away, was used to protect this place, it won't make Mom happy. Anyway, she'll simply smile and say: 'Since there was bad weather, it can't be helped'... Although she'll probably still be sad."

Chihaya and Isuzu stared at each other, resulting in an atmosphere that did not allow any outsiders to interrupt. This silence exuded a feeling that "perhaps this incident was finally drawing to a conclusion." However, there was naturally someone who failed to read the mood and forcibly interjected:

"Yes! I agree! You're an idiot and you're also an idiot! Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One and Number Two are both idiots! No no no, saying this is not enough, I should call you idiotic idiots! You really went too far! You two need to reflect carefully on your actions!"

"H-Hey, Fear..."

"What, you got a problem with that? I don't care, let me say my fill! First of all, you, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two!"

"...What about... Isuzu...?"

Isuzu slowly looked up. Fear nodded then picked up the Rubik's cube by her feet and brushed the soil away.

"You're absolutely wrong. As for where you went wrong, I can't explain in simple terms... Hmm.. Let me ask you, while you were being tortured by me, was it painful?"

"Yes..."

"I know right? I am the cube used for torture and execution, created only for the sake of torturing and executing humans, making use of all sorts of ways to make a display of their forms. However—the current me does not find any joy in that at all. Rather, I'm totally disgusted by it. Do you know why?"

Isuzu remained silent. While receiving her gaze, Fear pressed the Rubik's cube against her own chest. The toy cube did not have any warmth, but she did. Haruaki wondered to himself if Fear was possibly experiencing their difference.

"Because right now, the current me is also human. That's why I believe: for cursed tools that also count as human at the same time, trying to please humans as a cursed tool is no longer the meaning of our existence."

"..."

"For us who have become similar to humans, there are some things that only human-like beings can do. At least compared to torturing people as a cursed tool, I think that's much better and something I should pursue more. That's right... I want to do more things that are helpful to humans. This is for lifting my curse. But even if this goal is removed, I actually enjoy doing the helpful behavior itself and it brings me a special feeling of happiness."

Fear placed the Rubik's cube back into her pocket and stared into Isuzu's face again:

"So definitely, there's no need for you to be obsessed with your identity as a cursed set of kagura bells to help this girl. Just try your best using your identity as ordinary Isuzu, the one who became human."

Isuzu's gaze wavered. What was she thinking about? Haruaki had no way of finding out but he was sure that the words coming from Fear, who stood in the same position, definitely reached Isuzu's heart.

"But... Isuzu... needs power... no matter what. Power... to protect..."

"Yes, this is the point! Time for me to lecture the next person, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One!"

Fear suddenly turned around, shaking water droplets from her wet silver hair as she pointed her index finger at Chihaya. Chihaya jumped in surprise.

"M-Me?"

"That's right, you made a great big mistake too! Didn't you just say something like 'since there's bad weather, it can't be helped'!? This field is your mother's treasure, right? How could you give up on it so easily!?"

"E-Even if you say that..."

Ignoring Chihaya's frown, Fear yelled loudly: "Next comes a double lecture—!" while pointing her finger forcefully, back and forth between Chihaya and Isuzu.

"Listen carefully. Right now, it's impossible to use Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two's power to blow the rain clouds away. Then the answer is simple, just use other kinds of power to protect the kitchen garden!"

The instant he heard this sentence, Haruaki understood what Fear wanted to say while complicated emotions rose up in his heart. "Looks like this'll be tough." A sense of exhaustion. "Can't relax yet." A sense of tension. Also—"So this is the way." A sense of relief.

"How troubling, engaging in a massive operation the first thing on New Year's Day."

"Hoo~ I was thinking if things might turn out this way..."

"Whether it'll turn out to be absolutely ridiculous—Hmm, I guess we'll only know after trying it."

"Looks like there's quite a lot that needs to be done. Where should we start~?"

"I-I'm helping out for sure this time!!"

"It seems like trying to dissuade Sovereignty will be futile... However, it goes without saying, I won't be doing anything at all. But if you want me to prepare a kitchen knife, a rope or poison, I could help you with one of them... Oh right, then a grave needs to be dug afterwards, so there are two things needed to be done. How troublesome. May I ask you to dig a hole and jump into it yourself?"

Watching Haruaki's group talking among themselves, Chihaya and Isuzu looked puzzled.

"W-What are you guys talking about...?"

"You still don't get it? This entire commotion was because you wanted to protect this field, right? If the ending becomes something stupid like 'ultimately, the rain washed everything away~', then all our efforts would have been for nothing! That's why—what I mean is you should borrow our power!"

"Wha—"

"Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Two, what are you spacing out for!? If you're gonna struggle, struggle to the very end!"

Chihaya and Isuzu exchanged looks again. After pondering in a moment's silence, Chihaya smiled faintly.

"What a bunch of meddling perverts... However, I have no choice either."

The rain continued unabated, even getting stronger and stronger. Catching raindrops in her palm, Chihaya reached out to Isuzu at the same time.

"Do you wanna try struggling a bit? Even if it turns out to be fruitless, it's better than just watching this kitchen garden at least. If you agree as well... Then hurry and stand up, idiot."

"Fufu—because Isuzu is Chihaya-sama's subordinate and slave... There's apparently no right to veto~ Then please allow me to say in fear and trepidation... Isuzu will try her very best~"

Also smiling, Isuzu held Chihaya's hand and stood up.

Finally, Konoha spoke up with a smile:

"Let me say this first of all. Your first priority should be getting dressed. Also, regarding the situation when you stole Haruaki-kun's voice, please repeat to me in detail... Ufufu?"

"..."

Clearly, Haruaki's first priority was telling Konoha that Kuroe had fabricated a bunch of lies to anger her.

However, who knew how much persuading it would take before Konoha would believe him?

Part 4

After clearing up Konoha's misunderstanding with great difficulty, Haruaki made a trip back to the Hayakawa residence together with Chihaya first. After bringing back necessary equipment to the kitchen garden, the entire team was already mobilized, having started their task of protecting the field. Everyone was already drenched but no one—well, except for Shiraho who was hiding beneath a large tree and glaring with extreme resentment—No one minded.

"The slope's structure is like this... Supposing the water flows over here, it will most likely come from that side. So a few more gutters need to be dug in this direction..."

"I see now, I get it. Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»!"

After Konoha gestured to give directions, Fear wielded her massive drill and started digging the surface in the field's surroundings. Considering how drills were normally used, this was actually not far from its original purpose, but since Haruaki had only seen Fear use it as a weapon, the sight seemed quite unfamiliar.

Konoha disappeared into the forest after giving instructions. Then shortly after, the sound of trees falling could be heard. Presumably, she was chopping trees down further away in consideration of the drainage effects of losing trees in the field's surroundings.

"Okay~ Everybody do your best~! Come on, one-two, one-two!"

Waving her arms, Sovereignty was leading a group of strange fellows out from the forest where Konoha was cutting trees down. These were crude wooden dolls created by carving tree trunks into humanoid form (probably Konoha's creations), carrying logs in their arms as they advanced. The scene was quite surreal.

Meanwhile, Kuroe was turning her hair into steel wires then severing them to wrap around vegetables as support. Helping out in this task were also Kirika and the fifteen bells of Isuzu.

"Looking at it again, this scene is really super weird... Good heavens."

"You guys are the only weirdos here. We're very normal."

"I-I don't agree with that... Say, apart from Isuzu, all the others have showed up, although I still can't tell them apart."

"Because apart from Isuzu, the rest's only limitation is not being able to speak or cast spells. At the very least, they can be used as simple labor."

Naturally, Isuzu's comrades had all picked up the soiled shrine maiden outfits from the ground and worn them. Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief for that while putting down the vinyl tarp and other equipment brought from the Hayakawa family's storeroom. Hence, Kuroe, Kirika and Isuzu's group came near.

"Uwah, the rain is so heavy now... Although it's only temporary support, the vegetables' reinforcement task is complete~"

"A vinyl tarp? We do need that. Also, the wind is blowing stronger and stronger... Looks like the typhoon-class tropical depression isn't an exaggeration at all. Anyway, we just have to try our best to do what we need to do."

"What should Isuzu do next~?"

"..." "..." "..." As though saying "me too, me too," the other kagura bells were nodding silently as they gathered around.

"Hey, don't press your identical faces close to me, it's very creepy! There are still many things to do. Anyway, I've brought all the shovels, so half of you should go help the silver-haired girl to dig gutters! Next is—"

While everyone was busy with their respective tasks, Konoha returned from the forest. Presumably, she had finished cutting down all the trees they needed. Then she sliced up the logs brought back by Sovereignty's wooden dolls to create many wooden boards.

"Set these wooden boards upright in the surroundings to act as fences. But too many will block drainage so don't surround the kitchen garden completely. Well, as for hammering down the boards... I guess we don't have any tools. Then just rely on that child's convenient carpentry tool."

"Who are you calling a carpentry tool? I'll curse you! Damn it, but there's no other way... Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling! Shameless Shrine Maiden Number Whatever over there, come here and hold the board for me!"

Hence, Fear started lining up wooden boards around the field and hammering them into the ground using the massive steel club.

"Okay, then it's our turn to dig gutters in Fear-chan's place, right? Okay, you guys work faster~! There's not much time left, move it!"

Sovereignty's wooden dolls lined up in a row and thrust their hands into the ground in unison to dig the soil. Having reached this point already, however, Haruaki still could not help but think: How convenient in times like these. Nevertheless, it still felt very surreal.

Haruaki and the remaining people started to cover the vegetables with the vinyl tarp. Simply spreading out the folded tarp was enough to feel the strong gusts of wind. The tarp kept fluttering nonstop, making flapping noises.

Just as each person caught one of the four corners of the vinyl tarp, trying to cover up the vegetable garden, the wind suddenly blew harder all at once, rivaling the gales unleashed by Isuzu and her comrades earlier. Next, as though carried by the wind, the rain also increased suddenly in volume. Haruaki even found it difficult to see Kirika on the other side of the tarp.

"Woah! Th-This is terrible!"

"L-Looks like the actual storm is coming... This is... absolutely ridiculous...!"

"Sovereignty, how are you doing with the gutters!?"

"W-We're trying our best~! There's already a lot of water flowing into them, so I guess we should dig deeper, right!?"

"Then we're relying on you. But don't push yourself too much!"

"Take that! Th-This should do...? Oh man, all the fences we put up have started slanting so soon!? Damn it, Shameless Shrine Maidens, let's do it again! Follow me!"

From the other side of the rain water curtain, yelling from Konoha and Fear could be heard. Currently, due to the rumbling wind and rain, it was impossible to talk without shouting over the noise.

However, there was no time to be worrying about others right now. Crouching on the ground, pulling the tarp against the astounding force of

the wind, Haruaki's group finally managed to cover up the vegetable garden.

"Woah... Simply holding this down is very difficult...! What's with this wind!?"

"That's right, Yachi. You go find some rocks to weigh it down! I'll hold down your end using the «Black River» for now!"

"G-Got it. Say, this really no different from a typhoon. If I hold an umbrella, I'll probably fly!"

Haruaki remarked as he was about to set off in search of rocks—

"Wah~"

"Woah! K-Kuroe~!"

Sensing there was something blocking the rain above, Haruaki suddenly looked up to find Kuroe actually flying in midair. Opposite to one end of the tarp which was being held down by the kagura bells, the other side had flown up due to the wind pressure. With Kuroe holding onto a corner of the tarp, she was flying like Superman with the tarp fluttering in the wind. Her light body weight was totally not enough for weighing down the tarp.

"Ohoh... I've finally gained the ability of flight... Invincible!"

"Hey Kuroe, is this my imagination or do you actually look happy!? That's too dangerous, hurry and find a way to get back down!"

"Muu, I'm discovered. But now is not the time for playing... I'll come down~"

Kuroe tied her hair into a bundle and managed to wrap it around a tree trunk on the side. The tree was already slanted due to the wind. With Kuroe's added force, it bent down even further. Slowly shortening the hair like a winch, Kuroe finally managed to land on the ground. Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hmm~ Looks like I can only help out while using this tree as my base. Haru, you be careful too~"

"Yeah! Say, we just need to find heavy rocks to take our place, that should barely manage... Uwah!"

Who knew if it was a remnant from Konoha's logging or snapped by the strong wind, a large tree branch flew through the air towards Haruaki. Ducking down on the ground, he barely managed to evade it.

"Th-There's no time to go find rocks... While I'm slowly looking for rocks, the tarp could very well get blown away!"

Once the tarp was gone in the wind, retrieving it would be virtually impossible. Currently, even standing was difficult. Using all four limbs, Haruaki scrambled back to his original position beside the tarp.

"Class Rep, I'm sorry, it looks like there's no other choice! Anyway, before the wind subsides, all we can do is hold it down with our weight!"

"R-Really? I understand! You be careful too!"

Passing through the curtain of rain water, the «Tragic Black River» extended along the ground and wrapped several times around his waist. She was probably hoping to provide him with a bit more support. Haruaki felt very grateful.

"Hey Cow Tits, are you helping out to weigh things down!? Now is the time to make use of your body's characteristic to put up an active performance!"

"What do you mean by that!? I'm the one who should be jealous of your constitution that won't be blown away by the wind easily, or rather, I should say weight!"

"What did you say!? I'll curse you!"

Fear and Konoha were apparently applying their strength to hold down the tarp as well. "Hyah~!" Suddenly, there was a scream. Haruaki looked over there to see Sovereignty and her team of wooden dolls also holding down the tarp.

"S-So cold~! But I will do my best, everybody do your best too~! Ah... Eh?"

"Arghhh, I've had enough! Yes, the wind and rain is so strong, it's cold as hell! It's the same for me, so whatever!"

"Shiraho..."

At some point in time, Shiraho had appeared beside Sovereignty, her beautiful face soiled by dirt and rain water. While wrapping her arms

around her lover's shoulders, she held down the tarp with her hands and feet like Sovereignty.

"...In these conditions, hiding under a tree to get away from the rain is completely meaningless. Cold and wet, this is truly the worst. Compared to that unreliable tree, I might as well lean against a certain warm and serious person whom I love, which would be a thousand times better."

"Ehehe... Thank you, Shiraho!"

"I-It's not like I've done anything that requires your thanks! Don't you get the wrong idea, Sovereignty!"

Everyone was giving their all, desperately protecting this vegetable garden from the storm. Due to the great volume of rain water, the garden's ground was turning into a swathe of mud. Was this okay? But had Fear and the others not dug gutters for drainage, this would probably have turned into a sea already. The sound of water rushing into the makeshift gutters could also be heard amidst the rain. The fences, erected through Fear and the shrine maidens' cooperation, also shook under the strong wind, making creaking sounds. Those fences were probably straining to help them block water that had not flowed into the gutters, as well as foreign objects like dirt and debris washed by the water.

The end seemed to be nowhere in sight. Due to the cold, Haruaki could not feel his hands that were holding down the tarp. He could not even be sure if he was applying force. Nevertheless, Haruaki still laid his entire body against the tarp and continued to hold it down.

(How much longer... will this... last...!?)

Nothing could answer the groans in Haruaki's heart.

Only the wind and rain continued to strengthen mercilessly.

What a bunch of weird people—Chihaya thought to herself while devoting all her strength to holding down the tarp.

This had nothing to do with them. This was simply her own selfish wish. Selfish willfulness.

However, why were these guys trying so hard?

(None of my business...!)

Leaving reasoning behind. What was right? What was wrong? What used to be right? What used to be wrong? None of these questions mattered at all.

Also, she only knew—

Inside her heart, there was indeed—A wish.

Wanting to protect her mother's treasure, the place for her return, a wish to protect this kitchen garden.

However, that was all.

Apart from this, nothing else mattered. There was no need to contemplate now.

Chihaya poured her strength again into holding down the tarp. Icy-cold rain. Exhaustion. Hazy consciousness. Were Isuzu and the rest okay? She suddenly felt worried and looked up. In the next instant, a piece of dirt, blown by the wind, flew into her mouth like a bullet. Frowning, she straightened her body lightly and was just about to spit out the dirt—

Suddenly, a gale began to blow, more powerful than ever. Although only her upper torso was blown by the wind, her exhausted body could not withstand even this. Blown over by the wind, she rolled on the ground.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Having lost Chihaya's weight, the vinyl tarp was lifted up as violently blowing wind rushed underneath it, trying to flip it up from inside. Chihaya could see Isuzu and the rest, their faces showing equal exhaustion from holding down the tarp, stumble as they unsteadily tried to press down the suddenly billowing tarp. However, redundant movements were fatal. Compared to when they were lying prone, more wind poured beneath the tarp, totally throwing the situation into complete disarray.

Disruption at one spot created a chain reaction and gradually began to spread. Beneath the curling vinyl tarp were the vegetables that Mom had cared for attentively before she was hospitalized, whose role was then taken over by Chihaya. Cabbage, spinach, turnip—as well as the Chinese cabbage that Mom looked forward to the most. Although every vegetable had some minimal support, all their leaves were drooping while their stems leaned slanted, screaming silently. If exposed directly to the wind and rain,

they would surely not last. The entire field's ridges and furrows would probably turn into a complete mess.

Clearly Mom was looking so forward to it, clearly harvest was fast approaching, clearly she had taken care of them till now. Clearly she had desperately devoted her full effort to take care of them, for the sake of letting Mom return here with a smile.

Were all these efforts for naught?

Mom's treasures, Mom's place to return, were they going to be destroyed?

No way. No way. Unacceptable. They must be protected well. I must protect them well—

Chihaya reached out desperately but could not catch the tarp. It was too late. At this moment, the blue sheet of vinyl plastic suddenly flipped up violently. Chihaya was struck by a sense of despair as though everything was coming to an end. Just as Chihaya was about to close her eyes because of that—

A certain person, apart from her, reached out and held down the blue fabric.

This person was dressed in white attire, symbolizing the sacred just like her shrine maiden outfit, however, his back was currently stained by dirt and rain water.

It was her father.

"Wh-What is this? Why... are... you here...?"

Even though his eyes were narrowed due to the rain, he still turned his head to face Chihaya and chuckled:

"I was thinking you'd surely be here. At the very least, I still know what you're thinking... Because you are my daughter."

Ahhh.

Harboring the same wish, she was not alone.

There was this... as well.

(...We... really are like fools...)

While thinking that, Chihaya crawled slowly beside him.

What had they been doing all this time? It was almost like—like a pair of bells, ringing at each other without making a sound, each hoping to catch the other's attention, throwing temper tantrums as though saying "why aren't you willing to understand me?"

Clearly that would not have worked in getting noticed.

Clearly... All they needed to do was speak up.

By speaking, surely the lost sounds of bell-ringing could be replaced, to become the echoing sound sufficient to transmit wishes to a certain person.

Hence—

"...Thank you."

Whispering as though murmuring to herself, Chihaya once again held down the vinyl tarp firmly beside him.

As for whether the minute bell-ringing could be transmitted successfully, surely, only the gods would know.

Epilogue

Part 1

After who knows how much time had gone by, Haruaki looked up with a start.

Above him was simply the night sky. Without him noticing, the sun had already set. Although a few dark clouds lingered, the falling rain had subsided to a drizzle. The wind, strong enough to make their ears ring, had stopped. In other words—

"I-It's finished...?"

Haruaki surveyed his surroundings. Everyone was sitting where they collapsed in exhaustion. Fear had stabbed her execution stake into the ground along with the tarp, holding onto it to withstand the strong wind apparently. Completely drained, she rested her chin against the tip of the stake and murmured softly:

"Good grief. Looks like the worst of the storm has passed. I never imagined I'd use my mechanisms like this."

"Me too... It feels like I was most active in cutting down trees... Sigh. How I regret not being able to use your saw."

"What are you talking about? You were most active holding down the tarp. The weight of all that voluminous and useless meat carries stability that no one can hope to match—"

"Are you talking about that again!?"

Fear and Konoha started arguing noisily as usual. What excess energy... As a side note, Haruaki really wished that Konoha could first take care of her neckline that had been ripped wide open for the flash grenade plan.

"Phew~ I've gained a valuable experience, basically along the lines of flying."

"That's just you, Kuroe-kun..."

"...(Sulking)."

"O-Oh dear, Shiraho, everything is over, safe and sound. We should rejoice! Don't sulk... Ohhh, there's dirt all over your face, Shiraho. Let me wipe your face a bit, okay?"

"Hoo... The same goes for your face too, Sovereignty. Let me wipe yours in return. Seriously, we must take a bath immediately after getting home, Sovereignty."

"Yes, of course! I'll help you scrub your back! Let's have a good soak together to warm ourselves!"

Kuroe and the others also seemed quite tired but there were no injuries apparently. Shiraho and Sovereignty had started flirting as though trying to escape reality, but Haruaki decided to ignore them. After all, if he carelessly approached or tried to converse, he could end up getting punched instantly.

The priest, who had arrived in the middle, sat directly on the ground, unconcerned about this white outfit, gazing peacefully at his daughter. The daughter was also looking back at him, but soon after, she averted her gaze and stood up. Finally, she seemed to say something to him. Judging from the priest's wry smile, it was probably not something rude or malicious, but more than likely, something twisted in her usual style.

Suddenly noticing, Fear and Konoha stopped arguing to observe the father and daughter situation.

Haruaki did not know how the father and daughter saw each other. Impossible to describe in words exactly. Naturally, Fear could not do so either and the same probably applied to even Chihaya and her father as well.

But Haruaki could not help but think that perhaps they did reach Fear successfully. For someone who was not human, not born from parents and had mentioned that she could not understand parent-child relationships through personal experience, perhaps Fear now comprehended a little more than before.

Because the scene before their eyes was surely that of an ordinary parent-child relationship.

Under the gazes of Haruaki's group, Chihaya slowly started to walk. Standing in front of Isuzu who was sitting on the ground, Chihaya looked

down silently towards her. The other kagura bells remained in the surroundings, but perhaps due to spending so much time together, Chihaya was apparently able to pick out Isuzu.

"Successfully... protected~ ...Chihaya-sama."

"...Yeah."

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Isuzu really... is a failure of a kagura bell~... It's great that Chihaya-sama's wish was fulfilled but it was definitely not through our power."

"..."

"Chihaya-sama... What should we do now? It seems that we are no longer capable of achieving our duties of transmitting wishes to the gods. Henceforth, what kind of existence should we live as~..."

Isuzu whispered. Chihaya sighed in exasperation and glared at her sideways:

"Jeez, you're really a hopeless idiot. You don't even know the answer to something like this? Nothing changed... You are yourself, my servant and slave. I know very well that you, my servant, are very stupid so I won't burden you with excessive expectations. So, all you need to do is stay by my side."

Chihaya then turned her face away as though embarrassed and continued with her arms crossed:

"That's right, I won't expect too much from you. What you're capable of is simply letting me stretch and play with your silly face, allowing me to relieve my stress. That's all. Also, all I do at home is go on the internet. No one visits me to play, so you'll be a substitute friend... No, you'll be my conversation partner! That's right, just being my conversation partner is enough! Like a flunkie! Despite talking about fulfilling my wish, you still ended up unable to help me! Don't be too full of yourself, you idiot!"

"Chihaya-sama..."

"Yes—However, until Mom returns, there are definitely many things that need to be protected properly. I will borrow your strength when the time comes. However... You don't have to strain yourself to help me using the power of your curse. Although I've repeated this many times already, it's because you're an idiot."

"But... For us to be like this, may we still continue to stay by your side, Chihaya-sama~? So long as you retain ownership of Isuzu, well... Chihaya-sama's curse won't..."

She was right. While playing with the Rubik's cube with one hand, Fear approached the two of them.

"This fact cannot be forgotten... Let me state for the record. Curses can be lifted. Also, that shameless brat over there has a constitution that's immune to curses. That's why we're living in the shameless brat's home and doing things to help mankind. But the situation is a bit different for Sovereignty over there. It's a little like probation, I guess."

"Oh... I see~"

"You lot should think it over carefully. Because of your curse, Shameless Shrine Maiden Number One here lost half her voice, resulting in this hoarseness. Also, the curse forces her to dance. I've already seen what happens if she doesn't dance. It looks really painful. Perhaps right now, it's okay with dancing a couple times a day, but who knows if the curse might strengthen in the future. When the time comes, she might have to dance ten times a day, or twenty—Finally, she might very well have to dance forever nonstop."

"Yes~ ...Isuzu is also very clear on the risks~ Ahhh, protecting Chihaya-sama's safety is imperative... Then of course, it's best that Isuzu stays with you girls—"

At this moment, Chihaya interrupted with great forcefulness:

"What the heck are you talking about! I already said you're my servant. It's way too early for you to start worrying about your master! Besides, dancing is nothing and I don't mind my voice at all! It's a lot better than those high-pitched and noisy voices in class at least! Anyway, I won't allow it. I absolutely refuse!"

"Muu... Hey, Haruaki, what should we do?"

Fear turned to him with a troubled look. Haruaki also wanted to make the same look but he also considered the fact that Isuzu and Chihaya definitely wanted to stay together. On the other hand, the dangers of the curse were very real, so he hoped that Isuzu could lift her curse. However, it looked like Chihaya had already resolved herself to endure the curse. In addition,

the curse did not seem to be the type to pose a threat immediately—Hmm...

"To be frank... I honestly hope you could move to our home, but I'm not asking you to separate from Chihaya forever."

"Hey, great pervert, don't pretend like you can carelessly call my name directly!"

Finding it too much of a pain to respond, Haruaki ignored her instead. By this point, calling her Chihaya-san would be too weird as well.

"So, curses really are quite scary. Even if you can endure it now, no one knows what might happen in the future."

"Yes. On this point, what Fear-kun mentioned just now could very well come true. Perhaps you may find it absolutely ridiculous, but it's all true."

Chihaya looked down and clenched her fist. Then spoke as though squeezing her voice out:

"You're all right. But—I want Isuzu to stay here. Because... Umm... Although she's an idiot, a flunkie is still a flunkie. I still have many tasks for her, like being my conversation partner, protecting this place, and also—welcoming Mom home together... etc."

Saying that, Chihaya shook her shoulders, as though saying "to think that would slip out." Still looking down, she continued with a voice that sounded like she was enduring pain, yet mixed with her easily seen-through denials:

"No, it's not like I wanted to let Mom see that I have friends—That's right, it's because when Mom comes home, I'll need manpower for a large-scale clean up. There are still many other things I want to use her as a flunkie for, so..."

Chihaya really seemed to want to live together with Isuzu. Despite the horror of curses, she still refused to back down. What should they do~? Just as Haruaki tilted his head in agonized contemplation, a fully malicious tongue clicking was heard, completely unsuited to the current mood.

"Let me say this... That's enough, human. You've discussed for too long. I would like nothing more than getting home immediately for a bath, nothing more than hurrying to forget this absolute worst memory of a New Year's Day. So, no matter what, hurry up and make a decision. If you can't decide, I'll do it for you—Keep the status quo. There."

"Keep the status quo... Meaning that we really leave them alone like this?"

"Indeed, their matter is none of my business. Naturally, it's none of your business either, human. Since she wants to stay together with that cursed tool, in her view, that curse is nothing to her, right? In this regard—She's the same as me."

"Yes, perhaps that's the case~ Ehehe."

Hugged tightly by Sovereignty, Shiraho continued quietly. Sovereignty's original curse "compelled her to kill the one she embraced tightly." But after the killing mechanism was completely destroyed, it essentially became nothing more than a curse to "simply embrace the owner." Despite the possibility for curses to change in nature, they still lived together, fully understanding the risks. In consideration of such possibilities, Haruaki's group continued to watch over them—

"Hmm, perhaps it's the same. In other words, just like my kindred suggested—Let's settle this with probation. How's that for a decision?"

"B-But..."

"Seriously, human, how indecisive can you get!? Out of the goodness of my heart, I've already offered you a solution. All you need to do is stop thinking and accept it! If you're still worried... Ah yes, then set a deadline! Such as until her mother is discharged from the hospital!"

It was impossible to tell if Shiraho offered her suggestion for Chihaya and Isuzu's sake or because she simply wanted to get home earlier. Nevertheless—even at this moment, Haruaki could not bring himself to force Chihaya and Isuzu apart. This was because Chihaya was currently bowing her head as though pleading sincerely while Isuzu was gazing at Chihaya and him with imploring eyes.

"Phew... I guess maybe that's the only... way to go..."

Haruaki scratched his head.

"I understand. Anyway, let's just keep the the status quo and have probation for now. But I have a condition. In any case, contact us immediately once your mother is discharged from the hospital. We will come over to check out the situation, then... Hmm, let's discuss the matter then. Before that, we might also visit you when we're free."

"It feels like we're just delaying the problem... But anyway, it doesn't look like the type of curse that'll become life threatening as soon as it gets stronger. It can't be helped, I guess."

"Yes, even if a situation arose, so long as we rush over immediately, there shouldn't be a problem. Anyway, it's decided, right?"

Konoha and the others expressed their opinion in turn while Haruaki continued to look at Chihaya. With serious eyes, she looked up and said:

"...That's the only condition?"

"No, there's one more. No matter how much you want to protect this vegetable garden, you can't force the curse to become stronger or steal other people's voices for power. So, don't work as a curse expert anymore."

"...Really? That's fine. After all, I don't do it because I wanna."

"Chihaya-sama... Speaking of which~"

"Hmph, it looks like you're still my servant for now. Okay, pull yourself together now! Stand up!"

"Huhyaa~ Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Chihaya-sama... It really hurts..."

"Hurting you is the point!"

Chihaya pinched Isuzu's cheek and forced her to her feet.

"Haha... Looks like we've gained another daughter. When my wife gets back, she's surely in for a great surprise..."

Without Haruaki noticing, the priest had started standing beside him with a friendly smile. Bowing deeply to express his gratitude, the priest said:

"Sorry for causing so much trouble to everyone. Whether because of this vegetable garden or my daughter."

"D-Don't mention it. This is just a casual favor, you don't need to bow and thank us! Besides... Regarding Isuzu's matter, we seem to have made the decision without consulting you, sorry about that..."

"Don't worry about it. Although curses still don't feel very real to me, if Chihaya has already steeled her determination, I shouldn't butt in by this

point. Besides... That house really is too empty for two people to live in. Also, Chihaya seems quite happy."

"I'm not quite sure if she's happy or not... But anyway, if anything goes wrong, please contact us immediately. Uh... Let me give my cellphone number to your daughter first."

Saying that, Haruaki held his cellphone and walked over to Chihaya. Chihaya spoke with displeasure: "I'm really worried about whether you'd prank call me." Nevertheless, she still exchanged telephone numbers more readily than expected. After the exchange, Haruaki noticed that she was frequently glancing to one side.

"U-Umm... Uh... About just now..."

"What's the matter? Oh, you're referring to my suggestion just now? I simply want to return home faster. Even if you thank me, I'll still feel troubled."

Chihaya's gaze was directed towards Shiraho who was answering nonchalantly while locked in embrace with Sovereignty. Faced with Shiraho's indifferent tone of voice, Chihaya seemed to be too scared to talk. Seeing that, Shiraho finally relaxed her expression slightly.

"...Hmm, to be honest, I am slightly concerned about you two who share the same situation as us. However, unlike these humans, I have no intention of checking up on you two, so perhaps we might not meet again. So just in case, let me remind you... Although these children are not the same as humans and living with them will bring you a different kind of happiness, it could be very tough. So please try your best."

"Y-Yes..."

Chihaya stammered inexplicably to answer and bowed her head. It was unclear if Chihaya was acting this way due to Shiraho's smile despite being of the same gender, feeling ashamed in the face of Shiraho's otherworldly beauty, or if she felt embarrassed simply to watch Shiraho and Sovereignty's intimate displays of affection.

The rain had almost stopped. Isuzu turned her comrades back into bells and kept them inside her body. As though mustering her vigor, Chihaya straightened her back and looked again over the field they had successfully protected. Although it was not free from damage, at least it

was not destroyed. With a bit of work afterwards, it should recover immediately.

A little proudly, as though looking at something dazzling, Chihaya narrowed her eyes.

"Well... It looks like there's no problem, Isuzu, so it's about time for us to go back. For the rest of today, I just wanna hurry to take a bath and go to bed."

"Yes~ Then everyone, please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, sorry for all the trouble~ Isuzu shall never forget to repay everyone's kind assistance in the future—"

Displaying a gentle smile as usual, Isuzu bowed in gratitude towards Haruaki's group many times. Walking past her, Chihaya pinched her face in an extremely smooth and practiced manner:

"Stop bowing again and again! I already said we're leaving, so hurry and get going. You're really an idiot of a flunkie! Okay, hurry and go!"

"Oww... Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, it really hurts..."

"Hurting you is the point!"

Hence, Chihaya and Isuzu made their way home. Seeing this, the priest also bowed deeply and followed after his daughters, separated by a small distance.

At this moment, just as Haruaki's group was watching the trio leave, they suddenly heard talking. Chihaya halted in her steps.

"I forgot to ask you guys... Of course, there's compensation, right?"

"Compensation?"

"That's right. Although I've decided to accept the conditions you proposed, there's nothing in it for us. So, you guys have to think of something. In other words—"

The delinquent shrine maiden's shoulder quivered once. She was probably sighing. Then without looking back, she said:

"For protecting this garden, since you said I'm not allowed to use the power of curses—That means I must use other powers. Next time a typhoon comes, I will call you guys. No complaints allowed, you must come!"

Saying that all on her own, Chihaya continued walking.

Haruaki and his friends looked at one another. After shrugging, they all laughed silently.

Obviously, without any thinking required, there was only one possible answer to shout in return at Chihaya's back.

Part 2

A few days passed after New Year's Day. Morning on a certain Monday. While lamenting the short length of the winter break, Haruaki yawned as he opened the entryway at home. Because it was a public holiday, Kuroe, who still considered herself on winter break, was leaving the house together with them, saying "I'll start working tomorrow. While there's still time, let me clean up the shop and go over my inventory~"

While listening inattentively to Fear and Konoha's noisy disputes, Haruaki locked up the main door to his house. He yawned again. After all, it was just the opening ceremony today, so he planned on taking an afternoon nap after returning home. Just as he thought to himself, he suddenly noticed something as he started walking.

In front of his home entrance was an unexpected figure.

"What!?"

"...Oh~ dear, that's why I didn't want to come. The great pervert's gonna violate me visually again."

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, that's because you look too adorable in your school uniform, Chihaya-sama~"

"So what you mean is that I can't avoid getting violated by people's eyes? As a servant, that's quite bold of you. Since I'm very impressed with you, look forward to screaming in pain."

"Oww, it hurts, Chihaya-sama~"

Before their eyes was Chihaya in uniform, accompanied by Isuzu. A bicycle was parked next to Chihaya, who was constantly playing with her cellphone as always. She probably rode it here, right? Since no bike could be seen for Isuzu, did she actually follow by running after Chihaya? It did not matter within the shrine's confines, but it was quite unbelievable for

Isuzu to be running around in a shrine maiden outfit that did not fit her surroundings.

"Nuoh, it's Shameless Shrine Maidens Number One and Two! W-What's up? Is there a problem!?"

"...No problem. Just the same as usual."

"Th-That sounds about right. After that, only the priest called us once to express his thanks and chatted for a bit without anything special to say."

"No problem would be best of course... So, why are you two here?"

Hearing Konoha's question, Chihaya suddenly used one hand to close the phone she was playing with and scratched her head. She also pushed up her glasses purposelessly. Then stammering, she hesitated over what to say. As a side note, during all this time, her other hand was occupied with pinching Isuzu's cheek.

After a while of awkward hesitation, Chihaya turned her gaze to the bike's basket, nodding as though saying "Oh right."

"...That guy told me to bring this. He said something about having received your care. Clearly I said it wasn't necessary."

"What are you talking about?"

"This thing! Here!"

Chihaya grabbed the plastic bag that was kept in the bike basket and handed it to Haruaki in a throwing manner. Haruaki peered inside to see several kinds of vegetables. Cabbage, turnip—as well as Chinese cabbage.

"This is...?"

"...While rebuilding the garden, I took the opportunity to pick all the vegetables that were undamaged and ready for harvesting. To be honest, this kind of return gift is totally retarded. The act of thanking itself is even more retarded."

"No, this will really help us out a lot. Thank you."

Although some of the vegetables were not completely ripe, it would definitely help ease the family budget. Haruaki immediately began to ponder what dishes he could make with them. At this moment—

"Also—No matter what, coming all this way just to deliver vegetables would be totally stupid. So... I consider this trash recycling, so I'm just dumping on you something I don't want. That's right, this isn't my return gift to you at all. After all, this thing is just taking up space at home since I dunno how to use it, and I just happened to remember it."

"...?"

"Chihaya-sama, your behavior is too inexplicable and suspicious!"

"Shut up! Anyway, this is the thing, here! I'm giving it to you along with the vegetables. If you guys don't need it, dispose of it yourself!"

Saying that, Chihaya took out from her pocket and threw something onto Haruaki's palm—a very familiar object.

A card carved with patterns resembling some kind of emblem.

An Indulgence Disk.

"What!? Why would you have this!?"

"Eh, you know what it is? ...Oh~ Then that means it wasn't a scam. Not long before meeting you guys, I bought it from an underground website. The shop advertised it as a rare item, top-class for 'reducing curses.' I was thinking maybe I could make use of it... But it's completely useless without any idea how it's used. I even thought there would be an instruction sheet attached. What a waste of money. I pretty much spent everything I earned as a curse expert on this thing!"

Chihaya pouted angrily as she spoke. That was completely understandable, Haruaki thought. The only ways he had seen this type of card being used was either shoved directly into the body by force or connected to the original object through some sort of weird device. Without any knowledge at all, it was impossible to make effective use of. Although there was only one apparently, to think it would be sold on the internet, how astonishing.

"Ohoh~ The world of the internet is truly boundless. I'm quite surprised myself... As expected of someone who appears to live in a junk shop out of a Sci-Fi flick~"

"What are you talking about...? Anyway, you guys mentioned something about lifting curses, right? That's why I was thinking, rather than let it rot at home as trash, I should toss it to you guys instead."

"Is that so? Hmm, not only is it not trash, but it's also something that we need very much. Then I'll accept it gratefully. Haruaki, don't lose it."

"Of course I'm not going to lose it."

Haruaki carefully placed the Indulgence Disk into his schoolbag. He decided to insert the card into Fear when they return home after school.

As though saying "that's it," Chihaya walked over to her parked bike. Haruaki narrowed his eyes at her figure. Due to the sudden appearance of an Indulgence Disk, he could not help but put the issue aside, but now it was really bothering him. He must confirm this. Haruaki felt compelled to go back to what he felt when he first saw her uniform and went "What!?"

"Hey... Excuse me, you..."

"What, you still have more to say? Then be quick. Since I ride my bike to school, I was forced to make a detour to this place, but it's actually quite far from my route to school. If you don't hurry, I'll be late."

"Uh, I can already tell that you bike to school..."

"Then what is it? Oh, this girl? Don't worry, it's always like this. I just explain that she's a silly shrine maiden who jogs in her outfit to work out. I've already mentioned this before. Because she can't leave me too far, once we get to school, I order her to hide somewhere appropriate until school is over—"

"No no no, that's not what I'm talking about."

Haruaki narrowed his eyes further but could not shake his conviction no matter how many times he tried. There was no doubt at all. How could this be? He had been mistaken all along. Neither had he noticed.

But this definitely required confirmation. Keeping himself calm, breathing deeply a few times, Haruaki resolved himself and stared straight at Chihaya—

He asked:

"Are you... a middle schooler?"

"Wha? Isn't it obvious? Or you mean you still don't know? Are you a moron?"

Given Chihaya's harsh manner of speaking, arrogant attitude and physical maturity that was no different from the level of Haruaki's group, he did not notice until now. However, no mistake about it—right in front of Haruaki, Chihaya was currently wearing a sailor-style uniform. The school crest at her collar belonged to a public middle school that they occasionally passed by in front of the train station.

"N-No way..."

After Haruaki groaned, Chihaya curled her lips in a malevolent grin:

"That's right. What a shock if you only discovered now. After all, you've been getting aroused from a middle schooler's thighs and armpits, going as far as to hug me tightly. Ohoh, scary scary. The great pervert is actually a criminal."

Despite clearly knowing Haruaki's seniority in age, she still did not stop calling him by that insulting title? How unlikeable.

"Hmm? A middle school is where students study before going to high school... So basically, it's that? You're going to become our underclassman, right? Ohoh, I'll have a junior for the first time!"

"Yeah, in any case, you'll automatically gain many underclassmen after three months or so. Say—Chihaya, what year are you in right now?"



"Third year."

"Oh~ That's a year's difference."

At this moment, Chihaya began to examine Haruaki and the others' uniforms as though she suddenly noticed something. Then lowering her voice, she asked:

"—Umm, I have something to ask you guys too. That's the uniform of Taishyuu High, right? Then the person who came with you guys, the one who looks like a model... Does she go to the same school?"

"You mean Shiraho? Yeah, although she's not in our homerooms, she does go to the same school. The other person, the very cheerful and bubbly one, is called Sovereignty. Although she's not a student, she works at the superintendent's office—"

"You don't need to introduce the other girl. Really? The same school? Hmm... Then I'll see her... again...?"

"Fufufu~ Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Chihaya-sama has already become that lady's devoted fan~ Chihaya-sama not only feels grateful for her kind words on our behalf, but along the way home, she even murmured: 'How do I become that beautiful? Does she use any kind of special beauty treatment?' It'd be wonderful if we could speak to her again~"

"Y-Y-You, what are you talking about!? Of course not, absolutely not! D-Don't say something stupid like this, they'll get the wrong idea! Okay, Isuzu, it's time to go! I'm gonna ride my bike at top speed, so prepare yourself!"

"Oh dear, Chihaya-sama, if you pull so hard, the skin of Isuzu's arm may become loose and flabby!"

"Then hurry up and become loose and flabby!"

Blushing to her ears, Chihaya pinched Isuzu's arm hard with her fingers and quickly mounted her bike. The exchange just now seemed to have revealed information that could not be ignored.

"H-Hey, could it be that you're—"

While stepping hard on the pedal, Chihaya looked back and smiled malevolently:

"Basically, that's my first choice for high school. Although I won't know the result until April—depending on the situation then, perhaps we will meet again even if we don't want to. Please let us get along when the time comes, senior."

After speaking in a tone of voice that seemed to ridicule Haruaki, Chihaya pedalled on her bike. On the other hand, Isuzu bowed her head lightly towards them as a polite farewell then followed after Chihaya with her swaying shrine maiden outfit. A rather paradoxical manner of running at high speed yet with high-class elegance.

Haruaki was a little stunned as he watched the two of them depart. At the same time, he wondered to himself.

To have encountered that kind of commotion on the first day of the new year, although there was a certain sense of foreboding—It looked like there was going to be many troublesome events lying ahead this year.

Nevertheless, this was definitely not completely negative. Despite all the troubles, there will be plenty of joy. Like always, this year was going to pass by with each day lively as ever—Two sides to the same coin, regarding his premonition.

(No... It's usually like this anyway, I guess.)

Haruaki smiled wryly in his heart while correcting his thoughts.

Suppose an underclassman was added to this group, one that was troublesome yet surprisingly considerate of family—

Their future days would surely end up being even more exciting than last year's.

Afterword

Happy New Year and hello again!

Just as I mentioned in the previous afterword, this volume consists of a relatively relaxed and lighthearted New Year's story. I hereby present to everyone, C³ IX~! This volume is published in March and it so happens that I was proofreading during New Year's (this afterword was also written in January), thus resulting in my first greetings for the new year. Eh, New Year's memories for this year? Basically cooped up at home under the kotatsu, banging on the keyboard or reading through drafts... Even though Haruaki was clearly running off to the New Year's first shrine visit, surrounded by girls! I-I'm not jealous at all!

Since it's the first shrine visit of the New Year, naturally, the new characters this time are: delinquent miko boobs / orthodox miko boobs. In other words, it won't be wrong to call it a miko boobs party! From the very start, I was thinking: "I really want to write about a miko character!" With this, my wish has finally come true. Ahhh, red hakama plus a white top, why is this simple combination so charming...? Then in order to confront this profound question, this volume is the result. (Just kidding.)

But whenever girls wear hakama, their cuteness really does become exceptional. During high school, I joined both the archery and the light music clubs. But the original reason why I joined archery was apparently because of a reason like "I get to see girls wearing hakama every day!" Also, among the authors I know, many of them were also members of archery clubs in the past. Hohoho, so everyone loves...? By the way (perhaps not every school is the same), the hakama worn for archery are clearly pants-style for the boys but skirt-style for the girls. Furthermore, a miko's red hakama is also in skirt-style...! Only the hakama worn by girls require them to "Be careful of strong wind!" Perhaps I can think of this as a certain will of the universe at work?

Anyway, that's it for the silly chatter. Finally, let's move onto some acknowledgements. Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, although I still haven't had the honor of seeing your illustrations at this point yet, I'm certain you'll draw wonderful miko boobs that'll suit the New Year's festive mood very well. While looking forward to auspicious miko boobs, let me say: I shall continue to be in your care for this year as well~! Then there are the editors in charge, Yuasa-sama and Fujiwara-sama. With two editors in charge for this volume, this is the first time I have two pairs of eyes to look

through a long draft. What an honor to receive such care from both of you. Please continue to bear with my troubles from now on!

Then there is everyone related to the production of this book, as well as all the readers, I am truly thankful to all of you!

X comes next after IX, of course... Finally, the double digits are here. Although I've said this many times already, if it weren't for all you readers' support, the series never could have persisted to this point. All I can offer is my heartfelt gratitude! As long as everyone is still willing to show your support, I'll continue to write and remain in your care!

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Kotatsu(炬燵): is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself. Kotatsu are used almost exclusively in Japan, although similar devices are used elsewhere.
2. ↑ Red White Song Battle(紅白歌合戦): commonly known as simply "Red-White"(紅白), an annual music show produced by Japanese broadcaster NHK for New Year's Eve. Performing in this show is strictly invitation-only, meaning that only the most successful singers in the Japanese music industry can perform.
3. ↑ Karuta(カルタ): a Japanese card game that involves matching cards and grabbing the required card before the opponent can do so. Cards are divided into "reading cards"(yomifuda) with corresponding "grabbing cards"(torifuda).
4. ↑ Lucky Laugh(福笑い): the fukuwarai is a Japanese game played around New Year's where players pin different facial parts (e.g. eyes, nose, mouth) onto a blank face and laugh at the humorous results.
5. ↑ Rice cake soup(お雑煮): ozōni is a Japanese soup containing mochi rice cakes. Strongly associated with Japanese New Year's, it is one of the most auspicious foods eaten for the occasion.
6. ↑ Traditionally, mochi is made by two people working alternately, one pounding cooked rice with a wooden mallet while the other turns and wets the mochi. A steady rhythm is required lest injuries result from the heavy wooden mallet.
7. ↑ Isuzu(伍鈴): the kanji i(伍) means "five" while suzu(鈴) means "bell."
8. ↑ Marble soda(ラムネ): Ramune is a brand of carbonated soft drink known for its distinctive bottle design, made of glass and sealed with a marble.
9. ↑ Hatsuyume(初夢): meaning "first dream," hatsuyume refers to the first dream of the new year, which is supposed to predict a person's luck over the incoming year. It is considered particularly auspicious to dream of Mount Fuji, a hawk and an eggplant. One theory is that the belief stems from the fact that Fuji is the tallest mountain in Japan, hawks are intelligent and strong, while the word for eggplant (nasu) sounds the same as achieving something (成す, also pronounced nasu).

10. ↑ Fishing girl: a reference to Umihara Kawase(海腹川背), a series of platform games starring the titular nineteen-year-old Japanese school girl. The games are characterized by worlds filled with birds and fishes with gameplay defined by rope physics.
11. ↑ Kagura dance bells(神楽鈴): a three-tiered set of bells used in kagura, a specific type of Shinto ceremonial dance.
12. ↑ Basically, their names simply count from one to fifteen, literally Bell One, Bell Two, Bell Three, etc. Isuzu would be Bell Five.

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